Weird Tales

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THE
DEVIL IN IRON

WEIRD ADVENTURE IN AN AMAZING ISLAND CITY OF GREEN STONE

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

C. L. MOORE
HUGH B. CAVE
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Devil in Iron

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A tale of Conan the barbarian—and an amazing island city of green stone

THE fisherman loosened his knife in its scabbard. The gesture was instinctive, for what he feared was nothing a knife could slay, not even the saw-edged crescent blade of the Yuetshi that could disembowel a man with an upward stroke. Neither man nor beast threatened him in the solitude which brooded over the castellated isle of Xapur.

He had climbed the cliffs, passed through the jungle that bordered them, and now stood surrounded by evidences of a vanished state. Broken columns glimmered among the trees, the straggling lines of crumbling walls meandered off into the shadows, and under his feet were broad paves, cracked and bowed by roots growing beneath.

The fisherman was typical of his race, that strange people whose origin is lost in the gray dawn of the past, and who have dwelt in their rude fishing-huts along the southern shore of the Sea of Vilayet since time immemorial. He was broadly built, with long apish arms and a mighty chest, but with lean loins and thin bandy legs. His face was broad, his forehead low and retreating, his hair thick and tangled. A belt for a knife and a rag for a loin-cloth were all he wore in the way of clothing.

That he was where he was proved that he was less dully incurious than most of his people. Men seldom visited Xapur. It was uninhabited, all but forgotten, merely one among the myriad isles which dotted the great inland sea. Men called it Xapur, the Fortified, because of its ruins, remnants of some prehistoric kingdom, lost and forgotten before the conquering Hyborians had ridden southward. None knew who reared those stones, though dim legends lingered among the Yuetshi which half intelligibly suggested a connection of immeasurable antiquity between the fishers and the unknown island kingdom.

But it had been a thousand years since any Yuetshi had understood the import of these tales; they repeated them now as a meaningless formula, a gibberish framed to their lips by custom. No Yuetshi had come to Xapur for a century. The adjacent coast of the mainland was uninhabited, a reedy marsh given over to the grim beasts that haunted it. The fisher's village lay some distance to the south, on the mainland. A storm had blown his frail fishing-craft far from his accustomed haunts, and wrecked it in a night of flaring lightning and roaring waters on the towering cliffs of the isle. Now in the dawn the sky shone blue and clear, the rising sun made jewels of the dripping leaves. He had climbed the cliffs to which he had clung through the night because, in the midst of the storm, he had seen an appalling lance of lightning fork out of the black heavens, and the concussion of its stroke, which had shaken the whole island, had been accompanied by a cataclysmic crash that he doubted could have resulted from a riven tree.

A dull curiosity had caused him to investigate; and now he had found what he sought and an animal-like uneasiness possessed him, a sense of lurking peril.

Among the trees reared a broken dome-

"In his dying throes he had become again the thing that crawled up from the Abyss millenniums gone."

like structure, built of gigantic blocks of the peculiar iron-like green stone found only on the islands of Vilayet. It seemed incredible that human hands could have shaped and placed them, and certainly it was beyond human power to have overthrown the structure they formed. But the thunderbolt had splintered the ton-heavy blocks like so much glass, reduced others to green dust, and ripped away the whole arch of the dome.

The fisherman climbed over the debris and peered in, and what he saw brought a grunt from him. Within the ruined dome, surrounded by stone-dust and bits of broken masonry, lay a man on a golden block. He was clad in a sort of skirt and a shagreen girdle. His black hair, which fell in a square mane to his massive shoulders, was confined about his temples by a narrow gold band. On his bare, muscular breast lay a curious dagger with a jeweled pommel, shagreen-bound hilt, and a broad crescent blade. It was much like the knife the fisherman wore at his hip, but it lacked the serrated edge, and was made with infinitely greater skill.

The fisherman lusted for the weapon,

The man, of course, was dead; had been dead for many centuries. This dome was his tomb. The fisherman did not wonder by what art the ancients had preserved the body in such a vivid likeness of life, which kept the muscular limbs full and unshrunken, the dark flesh vital. The dull brain of the Yuetshi had room only for his desire for the knife with its delicate waving lines along the dully gleaming blade.

Scrambling down into the dome, he lifted the weapon from the man's breast. And as he did so, a strange and terrible thing came to pass. The muscular dark hands knotted convulsively, the lids flared open, revealing great dark magnetic eyes whose stare struck the startled fisherman like a physical blow. He recoiled, dropping the jeweled dagger in his perturbation. The man on the dais heaved up to a sitting position, and the fisherman gaped at the full extent of his size, thus revealed. His narrowed eyes held the Yuetshi and in those slitted orbs he read neither friendliness nor gratitude; he saw only a fire as alien and hostile as that which burns in the eyes of a tiger.

Suddenly the man rose and towered above him, menace in his every aspect. There was no room in the fisherman's dull brain for fear, at least for such fear as might grip a man who has just seen the fundamental laws of nature defied. As the great hands fell to his shoulders, he drew his saw-edged knife and struck upward with the same motion. The blade splintered against the stranger's corded belly as against a steel column, and then the fisherman's thick neck broke like a rotten twig in the giant hands.

2

JEHUNGIR AGHA, lord of Khawarizm and keeper of the coastal border, scanned once more the ornate parchment scroll with its peacock seal, and laughed shortly and sardonically.

"Well?" bluntly demanded his counsellor Ghaznavi.

Jehungir shrugged his shoulders. He was a handsome man, with the merciless pride of birth and accomplishment.

"The king grows short of patience," said he. "In his own hand he complains bitterly of what he calls my failure to guard the frontier. By Tarim, if I can not deal a blow to these robbers of the steppes, Khawarizm may own a new lord."

Ghaznavi tugged his gray-shot beard in meditation. Yezdigerd, king of Turan, was the mightiest monarch in the world. In his palace in the great port city of Aghrapur was heaped the plunder of empires. His fleets of purple-sailed war galleys had made Vilayet an Hyrkanian lake. The dark-skinned people of Zamora paid him tribute, as did the eastern provinces of Koth. The Shemites bowed to his rule as far west as Shushan. His armies ravaged the borders of Stygia in the south and the snowy lands of the Hyperboreans in the north. His riders bore torch and sword westward into Brythunia and Ophir and Corinthia, even to the borders of Nemedia. His gilt-helmeted swordsmen had trampled hosts under their horses' hoofs, and walled cities went up in flames at his command. In the glutted slave markets of Aghrapur, Sultanapur, Khawarizm, Shahpur, and Khorusun, women were sold for three small silver coins—blond Brythunians, tawny Stygians, dark-haired Zamorians, ebon Kushites, olive-skinned Shemites.

Yet, while his swift horsemen overthrew armies far from his frontiers, at his very borders an audacious foe plucked his beard with a red-dripping and smoke-stained hand.

On the broad steppes between the Sea

of Vilayet and the borders of the eastern-most Hyborian kingdoms, a new race had sprung up in the past half-century, formed originally of fleeing criminals, broken men, escaped slaves, and deserting soldiers. They were men of many crimes and countries, some born on the steppes, some fleeing from the kingdoms in the west. They were called *kozak*, which means wastrel.

Dwelling on the wild, open steppes, owning no law but their own peculiar code, they had become a people capable even of defying the Grand Monarch. Ceaselessly they raided the Turanian frontier, retiring in the steppes when defeated; with the pirates of Vilayet, men of much the same breed, they harried the coast, preying off the merchant ships which plied between the Hyrkanian ports.

"How am I to crush these wolves?" demanded Jehungir. "If I follow them into the steppes, I run the risk either of being cut off and destroyed, or having them elude me entirely and burn the city in my absence. Of late they have been more daring than ever."

"That is because of the new chief who has risen among them," answered Ghaznavi. "You know whom I mean."

"Aye!" replied Jehungir feelingly. "It is that devil Conan; he is even wilder than the *kozaks*, yet he is crafty as a mountain lion."

"It is more through wild animal instinct than through intelligence," answered Ghaznavi. "The other *kozaks* are at least descendants of civilized men. He is a barbarian. But to dispose of him would be to deal them a crippling blow."

"But how?" demanded Jehungir. "He has repeatedly cut his way out of spots that seemed certain death for him. And, instinct or cunning, he has avoided or escaped every trap set for him."

"For every beast and for every man there is a trap he will not escape," quoth Ghaznavi. "When we have parleyed with the *kozaks* for the ransom of captives, I have observed this man Conan. He has a keen relish for women and strong drink. Have your captive Octavia fetched here."

Jehungir clapped his hands, and an impassive Kushite eunuch, an image of shining ebony in silken pantaloons, bowed before him and went to do his bidding. Presently he returned, leading by the wrist a tall handsome girl, whose yellow hair, clear eyes and fair skin identified her as a pure-blooded member of her race. Her scanty silk tunic, girded at the waist, displayed the marvelous contours of her magnificent figure. Her fine eyes flashed with resentment and her red lips were sulky, but submission had been taught her during her captivity. She stood with hanging head before her master until he motioned her to a seat on the divan beside him. Then he looked inquiringly at Ghaznavi.

"We must lure Conan away from the *kozaks*," said the counsellor abruptly. "Their war camp is at present pitched somewhere on the lower reaches of the Zaporoska River — which, as you well know, is a wilderness of reeds, a swampy jungle in which our last expedition was cut to pieces by those masterless devils."

"I am not likely to forget that," said Jehungir wryly.

"There is an uninhabited island near the mainland," said Ghaznavi, "known as Xapur, the Fortified, because of some ancient ruins upon it. There is a peculiarity about it which makes it perfect for our purpose. It has no shore-line, but rises sheer out of the sea in cliffs a hundred and fifty feet tall. Not even an ape could negotiate them. The only place where a man can go up or down is a narrow path on the western side that has the appearance of a worn stair, carved into the solid rock of the cliffs.

"If we could trap Conan on that island, alone, we could hunt him down at our leisure, with bows, as men hunt a lion."

"As well wish for the moon," said Jehungir impatiently. "Shall we send him a messenger, bidding him climb the cliffs and await our coming?"

"In effect, yes!" Seeing Jehungir's look of amazement, Ghaznavi continued: "We will ask for a parley with the *kozaks* in regard to prisoners, at the edge of the steppes by Fort Ghori. As usual, we will go with a force and encamp outside the castle. They will come, with an equal force, and the parley will go forward with the usual distrust and suspicion. But this time we will take with us, as if by casual chance, your beautiful captive." Octavia changed color and listened with intensified interest as the counsellor nodded toward her. "She will use all her wiles to attract Conan's attention. That should not be difficult. To that wild reaver she should appear a dazzling vision of loveliness. Her vitality and substantial figure should appeal to him more vividly than would one of the doll-like beauties of your seraglio."

OCTAVIA sprang up, her white fists clenched, her eyes blazing and her figure quivering with outraged anger.

"You would force me to play the trollop with this barbarian?" she exclaimed. "I will not! I am no market-block slut to smirk and ogle at a steppes-robber. I am the daughter of a Nemedian lord——"

"You were of the Nemedian nobility before my riders carried you off," returned Jehungir cynically. "Now you are merely a slave who will do as she is bid."

"I will not!" she raged.

"On the contrary," rejoined Jehungir with studied cruelty, "you will. I like Ghaznavi's plan. Continue, prince among counsellors."

"Conan will probably wish to buy her. You will refuse to sell her, of course, or to exchange her for Hyrkanian prisoners. He may then try to steal her, or take her by force—though I do not think even he would break the parley-truce. Anyway, we must be prepared for whatever he might attempt.

"Then, shortly after the parley, before he has time to forget all about her, we will send a messenger to him, under a flag of truce, accusing him of stealing the girl, and demanding her return. He may kill the messenger, but at least he will think that she has escaped.

"Then we will send a spy—a Yuetshi fisherman will do—to the *kozak* camp, who will tell Conan that Octavia is hiding on Xapur. If I know my man, he will go straight to that place."

"But we do not know that he will go alone," Jehungir argued.

"Does a man take a band of warriors with him, when going to a rendezvous with a woman he desires?" retorted Ghaznavi. "The chances are all that he *will* go alone. But we will take care of the other alternative. We will not await him on the island, where we might be trapped ourselves, but among the reeds of a marshy point which juts out to within a thousand yards of Xapur. If he brings a large force, we'll beat a retreat and think up another plot. If he comes alone or with a small party, we will have him. Depend upon it, he will come, remembering your charming slave's smiles and meaning glances."

"I will never descend to such shame!" Octavia was wild with fury and humiliation. "I will die first!"

"You will not die, my rebellious beauty," said Jehungir, "but you will be subjected to a very painful and humiliating experience."

He clapped his hands, and Octavia paled. This time it was not the Kushite

who entered, but a Shemite, a heavily muscled man of medium height with a short, curled, blue-black beard.

"Here is work for you, Gilzan," said Jehungir. "Take this fool, and play with her awhile. Yet be careful not to spoil her beauty."

With an inarticulate grunt the Shemite seized Octavia's wrist, and at the grasp of his iron fingers, all the defiance went out of her. With a piteous cry she tore away and threw herself on her knees before her implacable master, sobbing incoherently for mercy.

Jehungir dismissed the disappointed torturer with a gesture, and said to Ghaznavi: "If your plan succeeds, I will fill your lap with gold."

3

IN THE darkness before dawn an unaccustomed sound disturbed the solitude that slumbered over the reedy marshes and the misty waters of the coast. It was not a drowsy water-fowl nor a waking beast. It was a human who struggled through the thick reeds, which were taller than a man's head.

It was a woman, had there been anyone to see, tall, and yellow-haired, her splendid limbs molded by her draggled tunic. Octavia had escaped in good earnest, every outraged fiber of her still tingling from her experience in a captivity that had become unendurable.

Jehungir's mastery of her had been bad enough; but with deliberate fiendishness Jehungir had given her to a nobleman whose name was a byword for degeneracy even in Khawarizm.

Octavia's resilient flesh crawled and quivered at her memories. Desperation had nerved her climb from Jelal Khan's castle on a rope made of strips from torn tapestries, and chance had led her to a picketed horse. She had ridden all night, and dawn found her with a foundered steed on the swampy shores of the sea. Quivering with the abhorrence of being dragged back to the revolting destiny planned for her by Jelal Khan, she plunged into the morass, seeking a hiding-place from the pursuit she expected. When the reeds grew thinner around her and the water rose about her thighs, she saw the dim loom of an island ahead of her. A broad span of water lay between, but she did not hesitate. She waded out until the low waves were lapping about her waist; then she struck out strongly, swimming with a vigor that promised unusual endurance.

As she neared the island, she saw that it rose sheer from the water in castle-like cliffs. She reached them at last, but found neither ledge to stand on below the water, nor to cling to above. She swam on, following the curve of the cliffs, the strain of her long flight beginning to weight her limbs. Her hands fluttered along the sheer stone, and suddenly they found a depression. With a sobbing gasp of relief, she pulled herself out of the water and clung there, a dripping white goddess in the dim starlight.

She had come upon what seemed to be steps carved in the cliff. Up them she went, flattening herself against the stone as she caught the faint clack of muffled oars. She strained her eyes and thought she made out a vague bulk moving toward the reedy point she had just quitted. But it was too far away for her to be sure, in the darkness, and presently the faint sound ceased, and she continued her climb. If it were her pursuers, she knew of no better course than to hide on the island. She knew that most of the islands off that marshy coast were uninhabited. This might be a pirate's lair, but even pirates would be preferable to the beast she had escaped.

A vagrant thought crossed her mind as she climbed, in which she mentally compared her former master with the *kozak* chief with whom—by compulsion—she had shamelessly flirted in the pavilions of the camp by Fort Ghori, where the Hyrkanian lords had parleyed with the warriors of the steppes. His burning gaze had frightened and humiliated her, but his cleanly elemental fierceness set him above Jelal Khan, a monster such as only an overly opulent civilization can produce.

She scrambled up over the cliff edge and looked timidly at the dense shadows which confronted her. The trees grew close to the cliffs, presenting a solid mass of blackness. Something whirred above her head and she cowered, even though realizing it was only a bat.

She did not like the looks of those ebony shadows, but she set her teeth and went toward them, trying not to think of snakes. Her bare feet made no sound in the spongy loam under the trees.

Once among them, the darkness closed frighteningly about her. She had not taken a dozen steps when she was no longer able to look back and see the cliffs and the sea beyond. A few steps more and she became hopelessly confused and lost her sense of direction. Through the tangled branches not even a star peered. She groped and floundered on, blindly, and then came to a sudden halt.

Somewhere ahead there began the rhythmical booming of a drum. It was not such a sound as she would have expected to hear in the time and place. Then she forgot it as she was aware of a presence near her. She could not see, but she knew that something was standing beside her in the darkness.

With a stifled cry she shrank back, and as she did so, something that even in her panic she recognized as a human arm curved about her waist. She screamed and threw all her supple young strength into a wild lunge for freedom, but her captor caught her up like a child, crushing her frantic resistance with ease. The silence with which her frenzied pleas and protests were received added to her terror as she felt herself being carried through the darkness toward the distant drum which still pulsed and muttered.

4

As the first tinge of dawn reddened the sea, a small boat with a solitary occupant approached the cliffs. The man in the boat was a picturesque figure. A crimson scarf was knotted about his head; his wide silk breeches, of flaming hue, were upheld by a broad sash which likewise supported a simitar in a shagreen scabbard. His gilt-worked leather boots suggested the horseman rather than the seaman, but he handled his boat with skill. Through his widely open white silk shirt showed his broad muscular breast, burned brown by the sun.

The muscles of his heavy bronzed arms rippled as he pulled the oars with an almost feline ease of motion. A fierce vitality that was evident in each feature and motion set him apart from common men; yet his expression was neither savage nor somber, though the smoldering blue eyes hinted at ferocity easily wakened. This was Conan, who had wandered into the armed camps of the *kozaks* with no other possessions than his wits and his sword, and who had carved his way to leadership among them.

He paddled to the carven stair as one familiar with his environs, and moored the boat to a projection of the rock. Then he went up the worn steps without hesitation. He was keenly alert, not because he consciously suspected hidden danger, but because alertness was a part of him,

whetted by the wild existence he followed.

What Ghaznavi had considered animal intuition or some sixth sense was merely the razor-edged faculties and savage wit of the barbarian. Conan had no instinct to tell him that men were watching him from a covert among the reeds of the mainland.

As he climbed the cliff, one of these men breathed deeply and stealthily lifted a bow. Jehungir caught his wrist and hissed an oath into his ear. "Fool! Will you betray us? Don't you realize he is out of range? Let him get upon the island. He will go looking for the girl. We will stay here awhile. He *may* have sensed our presence or guessed our plot. He may have warriors hidden somewhere. We will wait. In an hour, if nothing suspicious occurs, we'll row up to the foot of the stair and wait him there. If he does not return in a reasonable time, some of us will go upon the island and hunt him down. But I do not wish to do that if it can be helped. Some of us are sure to die if we have to go into the bush after him. I had rather catch him descending the stair, where we can feather him with arrows from a safe distance."

Meanwhile the unsuspecting *kozak* had plunged into the forest. He went silently in his soft leather boots, his gaze sifting every shadow in eagerness to catch sight of the splendid tawny-haired beauty of whom he had dreamed ever since he had seen her in the pavilion of Jehungir Agha by Fort Ghori. He would have desired her even if she had displayed repugnance toward him. But her cryptic smiles and glances had fired his blood, and with all the lawless violence which was his heritage he desired that white-skinned golden-haired woman of civilization.

He had been on Xapur before. Less than a month ago he had held a secret conclave here with a pirate crew. He knew that he was approaching a point where he could see the mysterious ruins which gave the island its name, and he wondered if he would find the girl hiding among them. Even with the thought he stopped as though struck dead.

Ahead of him, among the trees, rose something that his reason told him was not possible. *It was a great dark green wall, with towers rearing beyond the battlements.*

Conan stood paralyzed in the disruption of the faculties which demoralizes anyone who is confronted by an impossible negation of sanity. He doubted neither his sight nor his reason, but something was monstrously out of joint. Less than a month ago only broken ruins had showed among the trees. What human hands could rear such a mammoth pile as now met his eyes, in the few weeks which had elapsed? Besides, the buccaneers who roamed Vilayet ceaselessly would have learned of any work going on on such stupendous scale, and would have informed the *kozaks*.

There was no explaining this thing, but it was so. He was on Xapur and that fantastic heap of towering masonry was on Xapur, and all was madness and paradox; yet it was all true.

He wheeled to race back through the jungle, down the carven stair and across the blue waters to the distant camp at the mouth of the Zaporoska. In that moment of unreasoning panic even the thought of halting so near the inland sea was repugnant. He would leave it behind him, would quit the armed camps and the steppes, and put a thousand miles between him and the blue mysterious East where the most basic laws of nature could be set at naught, by what diabolism he could not guess.

For an instant the future fate of kingdoms that hinged on this gay-clad barbarian hung in the balance. It was a small thing that tipped the scales—merely a shred of silk hanging on a bush that caught his uneasy glance. He leaned to it, his nostrils expanding, his nerves quivering to a subtle stimulant. On that bit of torn cloth, so faint that it was less with his physical faculties than by some obscure instinctive sense that he recognized it, lingered the tantalizing perfume that he connected with the sweet firm flesh of the woman he had seen in Jehungir's pavilion. The fisherman had not lied, then; she *was* here! Then in the soil he saw a single track in the loam, the track of a bare foot, long and slender, but a man's, not a woman's, and sunk deeper than was natural. The conclusion was obvious; the man who made that track was carrying a burden, and what should it be but the girl the *kozak* was seeking?

He stood silently facing the dark towers that loomed through the trees, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire. Desire for the yellow-haired woman vied with a sullen primordial rage at whoever had taken her. His human passion fought down his ultra-human fears, and dropping into the stalking crouch of a hunting panther, he glided toward the walls, taking advantage of the dense foliage to escape detection from the battlements.

As he approached he saw that the walls were composed of the same green stone that had formed the ruins, and he was haunted by a vague sense of familiarity. It was as if he looked upon something he had never before seen, but had dreamed of, or pictured mentally. At last he recognized the sensation. The walls and towers followed the plan of the ruins. It was as if the crumbling lines had grown back into the structures they originally were.

NO SOUND disturbed the morning quiet as Conan stole to the foot of the wall which rose sheer from the luxuriant growth. On the southern reaches of the inland sea the vegetation was almost tropical. He saw no one on the battlements, heard no sounds within. He saw a massive gate a short distance to his left, and had no reason to suppose that it was not locked and guarded. But he believed that the woman he sought was somewhere beyond that wall, and the course he took was characteristically reckless.

Above him vine-festooned branches reached out toward the battlements. He went up a great tree like a cat, and reaching a point above the parapet, he gripped a thick limb with both hands, swung back and forth at arm's length until he had gained momentum, and then let go and catapulted through the air, landing catlike on the battlements. Crouching there he stared down into the streets of a city.

The circumference of the wall was not great, but the number of green stone buildings it contained was surprizing. They were three or four stories in height, mainly flat-roofed, reflecting a fine architectural style. The streets converged like the spokes of a wheel into an octagon-shaped court in the center of the town which gave upon a lofty edifice, which, with its domes and towers, dominated the whole city. He saw no one moving in the streets or looking out of the windows, though the sun was already coming up. The silence that reigned there might have been that of a dead and deserted city. A narrow stone stair ascended the wall near him; down this he went.

Houses shouldered so closely to the wall that half-way down the stair he

found himself within arm's length of a window, and halted to peer in. There were no bars, and the silk curtains were caught back with satin cords. He looked into a chamber whose walls were hidden by dark velvet tapestries. The floor was covered with thick rugs, and there were benches of polished ebony, and an ivory dais heaped with furs.

He was about to continue his descent, when he heard the sound of someone approaching in the street below. Before the unknown person could round a corner and see him on the stair, he stepped quickly across the intervening space and dropped lightly into the room, drawing his simitar. He stood for an instant statue-like; then as nothing happened he was moving across the rugs toward an arched doorway when a hanging was drawn aside, revealing a cushioned alcove from which a slender, dark-haired girl regarded him with languid eyes.

Conan glared at her tensely, expecting her momentarily to start screaming. But she merely smothered a yawn with a dainty hand, rose from the alcove and leaned negligently against the hanging which she held with one hand.

She was undoubtedly a member of a white race, though her skin was very dark. Her square-cut hair was black as midnight, her only garment a wisp of silk about her supple hips.

Presently she spoke, but the tongue was unfamiliar to him, and he shook his head. She yawned again, stretched lithely, and without any show of fear or surprize, shifted to a language he did understand, a dialect of Yuetshi which sounded strangely archaic.

"Are you looking for someone?" she asked, as indifferently as if the invasion of her chamber by an armed stranger were the most common thing imaginable.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Yateli," she answered languidly. "I must have feasted late last night, I am so sleepy now. Who are you?"

"I am Conan, a *hetman* among the *kozaks*," he answered, watching her narrowly. He believed her attitude to be a pose, and expected her to try to escape from the chamber or rouse the house. But, though a velvet rope that might be a signal cord hung near her, she did not reach for it.

"Conan," she repeated drowsily. "You are not a Dagonian. I suppose you are a mercenary. Have you cut the heads off many Yuetshi?"

"I do not war on water rats!" he snorted.

"But they are very terrible," she murmured. "I remember when they were our slaves. But they revolted and burned and slew. Only the magic of Khosatral Khel has kept them from the walls——" She paused, a puzzled look struggling with the sleepiness of her expression. "I forgot," she muttered. "They *did* climb the walls, last night. There was shouting and fire, and people calling in vain on Khosatral." She shook her head as if to clear it. "But that can not be," she murmured, "because I am alive, and I thought I was dead. Oh, to the devil with it!"

She came across the chamber, and taking Conan's hand, drew him to the dais. He yielded in bewilderment and uncertainty. The girl smiled at him like a sleepy child; her long silky lashes drooped over dusky, clouded eyes. She ran her fingers through his thick black locks as if to assure herself of his reality.

"It was a dream," she yawned. "Perhaps it's all a dream. I feel like a dream now. I don't care. I can't remember something—I have forgotten—there is something I can not understand, but I grow so sleepy when I try to think. Anyway, it doesn't matter."

"What do you mean?" he asked uneasily. "You said they climbed the walls last night? Who?"

"The Yuetshi. I thought so, anyway. A cloud of smoke hid everything, but a naked, blood-stained devil caught me by the throat and drove his knife into my breast. Oh, it hurt! But it was a dream, because see, there is no scar." She idly inspected her smooth bosom, and then sank upon Conan's lap and passed her supple arms about his massive neck. "I can not remember," she murmured, nestling her dark head against his mighty breast. "Everything is dim and misty. It does not matter. You are no dream. You are strong. Let us live while we can. Love me!"

He cradled the girl's glossy head in the bend of his heavy arm and kissed her full red lips with unfeigned relish.

"You are strong," she repeated, her voice waning. "Love me—love——" The sleepy murmur faded away; the dusky eyes closed, the long lashes drooping over the sensuous cheeks; the supple body relaxed in Conan's arms.

He scowled down at her. She seemed to partake of the illusion that haunted this whole city, but the firm resilience of her limbs under his questing fingers convinced him that he had a living human girl in his arms, and not the shadow of a dream. No less disturbed, he hastily laid her on the furs upon the dais. Her sleep was too deep to be natural. He decided that she must be an addict of some drug, perhaps like the black lotus of Xuthal.

Then he found something else to make him wonder. Among the furs on the dais was a gorgeous spotted skin, whose predominant hue was golden. It was not a clever copy, but the skin of an actual beast. And that beast, Conan knew, had been extinct for at least a thousand years; it was the great golden leopard which figures so prominently in Hyborian legendry, and which the ancient artists delighted to portray in pigments and marble.

SHAKING his head in bewilderment, Conan passed through the archway into a winding corridor. Silence hung over the house, but outside he heard a sound which his keen ears recognized as something ascending the stair on the wall from which he had entered the building. An instant later he was startled to hear something land with a soft but weighty thud on the floor of the chamber he had just quitted. Turning quickly away, he hurried along the twisting hallway until something on the floor before him brought him to a halt.

It was a human figure, which lay half in the hall and half in an opening that obviously was normally concealed by a door which was a duplicate of the panels of the wall. It was a man, dark and lean, clad only in a silk loin-cloth, with a shaven head and cruel features, and he lay as if death had struck him just as he was emerging from the panel. Conan bent above him, seeking the cause of his death, and discovered him to be merely sunk in the same deep sleep as the girl in the chamber.

But why should he select such a place for his slumbers? While meditating on the matter, Conan was galvanized by a sound behind him. Something was moving up the corridor in his direction. A quick glance down it showed that it ended in a great door which might be locked. Conan jerked the supine body out of the panel-entrance and stepped through, pulling the panel shut after him. A click told him it was locked in place. Standing in utter darkness, he heard a shuffling tread halt just outside the door, and a faint

chill trickled along his spine. That was no human step, nor that of any beast he had ever encountered.

There was an instant of silence, then a faint creak of wood and metal. Putting out his hand he felt the door straining and bending inward, as if a great weight were being steadily borne against it from the outside. As he reached for his sword, this ceased and he heard a strange slobbering mouthing that prickled the short hairs on his scalp. Simitar in hand he began backing away, and his heels felt steps, down which he nearly tumbled. He was in a narrow staircase leading downward.

He groped his way down in the blackness, feeling for, but not finding, some other opening in the walls. Just as he decided that he was no longer in the house, but deep in the earth under it, the steps ceased in a level tunnel.

3

ALONG the black silent tunnel Conan groped, momentarily dreading a fall into some unseen pit; but at last his feet struck steps again, and he went up them until he came to a door on which his fumbling fingers found a metal catch. He came out into a dim and lofty room of enormous proportions. Fantastic columns marched about the mottled walls, upholding a ceiling, which, at once translucent and dusky, seemed like a cloudy midnight sky, giving an illusion of impossible height. If any light filtered in from the outside it was curiously altered.

In a brooding twilight Conan moved across the bare green floor. The great room was circular, pierced on one side by the great bronze valves of a giant door. Opposite this, on a dais against the wall, up to which led broad curving steps, there stood a throne of copper, and when Conan saw what was coiled on this throne, he retreated hastily, lifting his simitar.

Then, as the thing did not move, he scanned it more closely, and presently mounted the glass steps and stared down at it. It was a gigantic snake, apparently carved of some jade-like substance. Each scale stood out as distinctly as in real life, and the iridescent colors were vividly reproduced. The great wedge-shaped head was half submerged in the folds of its trunk; so neither the eyes nor jaws were visible. Recognition stirred in his mind. This snake was evidently meant to represent one of those grim monsters of the marsh which in past ages had haunted the reedy edges of Vilayet's southern shores. But, like the golden leopard, they had been extinct for hundreds of years. Conan had seen rude images of them, in miniature, among the idol-huts of the Yuetshi, and there was a description of them in the *Book of Skelos,* which drew on prehistoric sources.

Conan admired the scaly torso, thick as his thigh and obviously of great length, and he reached out and laid a curious hand on the thing. And as he did so, his heart nearly stopped. An icy chill congealed the blood in his veins and lifted the short hair on his scalp. Under his hand there was not the smooth, brittle surface of glass or metal or stone, but the yielding, fibrous mass of a *living* thing. He felt cold, sluggish life flowing under his fingers.

His hand jerked back in instinctive repulsion. Sword shaking in his grasp, horror and revulsion and fear almost choking him, he backed away and down the glass steps with painful care, glaring in awful fascination at the grisly thing that slumbered on the copper throne. It did not move.

He reached the bronze door and tried it, with his heart in his teeth, sweating with fear that he should find himself locked in with that slimy horror. But the

valves yielded to his touch, and he glided through and closed them behind him.

He found himself in a wide hallway with lofty tapestried walls, where the light was the same twilight gloom. It made distant objects indistinct and that made him uneasy, rousing thoughts of serpents gliding unseen through the dimness. A door at the other end seemed miles away in the illusive light. Nearer at hand the tapestry hung in such a way as to suggest an opening behind it, and lifting it cautiously he discovered a narrow stair leading up.

While he hesitated he heard in the great room he had just left, the same shuffling tread he had heard outside the locked panel. Had he been followed through the tunnel? He went up the stair hastily, dropping the tapestry in place behind him.

Emerging presently into a twisting corridor, he took the first doorway he came to. He had a twofold purpose in his apparently aimless prowling: to escape from the building and its mysteries, and to find the Nemedian girl who, he felt, was imprisoned somewhere in this palace, temple, or whatever it was. He believed it was the great domed edifice in the center of the city, and it was likely that here dwelt the ruler of the town, to whom a captive woman would doubtless be brought.

He found himself in a chamber, not another corridor, and was about to retrace his steps, when he heard a voice which came from behind one of the walls. There was no door in that wall, but he leaned close and heard distinctly. And an icy chill crawled slowly along his spine. The tongue was Nemedian, but the voice was not human. There was a terrifying resonance about it, like a bell tolling at midnight.

"There was no life in the Abyss, save that which was incorporated in me," it tolled. "Nor was there light, nor motion, nor any sound. Only the urge behind and beyond life guided and impelled me on my upward journey, blind, insensate, inexorable. Through ages upon ages, and the changeless strata of darkness I climbed——"

ENSORCELLED by that belling resonance, Conan crouched forgetful of all else, until its hypnotic power caused a strange replacement of faculties and perception, and sound created the illusion of sight. Conan was no longer aware of the voice, save as far-off rhythmical waves of sound. Transported beyond his age and his own individuality, he was seeing the transmutation of the being men called Khosatral Khel which crawled up from Night and the Abyss ages ago to clothe itself in the substance of the material universe.

But human flesh was too frail, too paltry to hold the terrific essence that was Khosatral Khel. So he stood up in the shape and aspect of a man, but his flesh was not flesh, nor the bone, bone, nor blood, blood. He became a blasphemy against all nature, for he caused to live and think and act a basic substance that before had never known the pulse and stir of animate being.

He stalked through the world like a god, for no earthly weapon could harm him, and to him a century was like an hour. In his wanderings he came upon a primitive people inhabiting the island of Dagonia, and it pleased him to give this race culture and civilization, and by his aid they built the city of Dagon and they abode there and worshipped him. Strange and grisly were his servants, called from the dark corners of the planet where grim survivals of forgotten ages yet lurked. His house in Dagon was connected with

every other house by tunnels through which his shaven-headed priests bore victims for the sacrifice.

But after many ages a fierce and brutish people appeared on the shores of the sea. They called themselves Yuetshi, and after a fierce battle were defeated and enslaved, and for nearly a generation they died on the altars of Khosatral.

His sorcery kept them in bonds. Then their priest, a strange gaunt man of unknown race, plunged into the wilderness, and when he returned he bore a knife that was of no earthly substance. It was forged of a meteor which flashed through the sky like a flaming arrow and fell in a far valley. The slaves rose. Their saw-edged crescents cut down the men of Dagon like sheep, and against that unearthly knife the magic of Khosatral was impotent. While carnage and slaughter bellowed through the red smoke that choked the streets, the grimmest act of that grim drama was played in the cryptic dome behind the great daised chamber with its copper throne and its walls mottled like the skin of serpents.

From that dome the Yuetshi priest emerged alone. He had not slain his foe, because he wished to hold the threat of his loosing over the heads of his own rebellious subjects. He had left Khosatral lying upon the golden dais with the mystic knife across his breast for a spell to hold him senseless and inanimate until doomsday.

But the ages passed and the priest died, the towers of deserted Dagon crumbled, the tales became dim, and the Yuetshi were reduced by plagues and famines and war to scattered remnants, dwelling in squalor along the seashore.

Only the cryptic dome resisted the rot of time, until a chance thunderbolt and the curiosity of a fisherman lifted from the breast of the god the magic knife and broke the spell. Khosatral Khel rose and lived and waxed mighty once more. It pleased him to restore the city as it was in the days before its fall. By his necromancy he lifted the towers from the dust of forgotten millenniums, and the folk which had been dust for ages moved in life again.

But folk who have tasted of death are only partly alive. In the dark corners of their souls and minds death still lurks unconquered. By night the people of Dagon moved and loved, hated and feasted, and remembered the fall of Dagon and their own slaughter only as a dim dream; they moved in an enchanted mist of illusion, feeling the strangeness of their existence but not inquiring the reasons therefor. With the coming of day they sank into deep sleep, to be roused again only by the coming of night, which is akin to death.

All this rolled in a terrible panorama before Conan's consciousness as he crouched beside the tapestried wall. His reason staggered. All certainty and sanity were swept away, leaving a shadowy universe through which stole hooded figures of grisly potentialities. Through the belling of the voice which was like a tolling of triumph over the ordered laws of a sane planet, a human sound anchored Conan's mind from its flight through spheres of madness. It was the hysterical sobbing of a woman.

Involuntarily he sprang up.

6

JEHUNGIR AGHA waited with growing impatience in his boat among the reeds. More than an hour passed, and Conan had not reappeared. Doubtless he was still searching the island for the girl he thought to be hidden there. But another surmise occurred to the Agha. Suppose the *hetman* had left his warriors near by,

and that they should grow suspicious and come to investigate his long absence? Jehungir spoke to the oarsmen, and the long boat slid from among the reeds and glided toward the carven stairs.

Leaving half a dozen men in the boat, he took the rest, ten mighty archers of Khawarizm, in spired helmets and tiger-skin cloaks. Like hunters invading the retreat of the lion, they stole forward under the trees, arrows on string. Silence reigned over the forest except when a great green thing that might have been a parrot swirled over their heads with a low thunder of broad wings, and then sped off through the trees. With a sudden gesture Jehungir halted his party, and they stared incredulously at the towers that showed through the verdure in the distance.

"Tarim!" muttered Jehungir. "The pirates have rebuilt the ruins! Doubtless Conan is there. We must investigate this. A fortified town this close to the mainland!—Come!"

With renewed caution they glided through the trees. The game had altered; from pursuers and hunters they had become spies.

And as they crept through the tangled growth, the man they sought was in peril more deadly than their filigreed arrows.

CONAN realized with a crawling of his skin that beyond the wall the belling voice had ceased. He stood motionless as a statue, his gaze fixed on a curtained door through which he knew that a culminating horror would presently appear.

It was dim and misty in the chamber, and Conan's hair began to lift on his scalp as he looked. He saw a head and a pair of gigantic shoulders grow out of the twilight gloom. There was no sound of footsteps, but the great dusky form grew more distinct until Conan recognized the figure of a man. He was clad in sandals, a skirt and a broad shagreen girdle. His square-cut mane was confined by a circlet of gold. Conan stared at the sweep of the monstrous shoulders, the breadth of swelling breast, the bands and ridges and clusters of muscles on torso and limbs. The face was without weakness and without mercy. The eyes were balls of dark fire. And Conan knew that this was Khosatral Khel, the ancient from the Abyss, the god of Dagonia.

No word was spoken. No word was necessary. Khosatral spread his great arms, and Conan, crouching beneath them, slashed at the giant's belly. Then he bounded back, eyes blazing with surprize. The keen edge had rung on the mighty body as on an anvil, rebounding without cutting. Then Khosatral came upon him in an irresistible surge.

There was a fleeting concussion, a fierce writhing and intertwining of limbs and bodies, and then Conan sprang clear, every thew quivering from the violence of his efforts; blood started where the grazing fingers had torn the skin. In that instant of contact he had experienced the ultimate madness of blasphemed nature; no human flesh had bruised his, but *metal* animated and sentient; it was a body of living iron which opposed his.

Khosatral loomed above the warrior in the gloom. Once let those great fingers lock and they would not loosen until the human body hung limp in their grasp. In that twilit chamber it was as if a man fought with a dream-monster in a nightmare.

Flinging down his useless sword, Conan caught up a heavy bench and hurled it with all his power. It was such a missile as few men could even lift. On Khosatral's mighty breast it smashed into shreds and splinters. It did not even

shake the giant on his braced legs. His face lost something of its human aspect, a nimbus of fire played about his awesome head, and like a moving tower he came on.

With a desperate wrench Conan ripped a whole section of tapestry from the wall and whirling it, with a muscular effort greater than that required for throwing the bench, he flung it over the giant's head. For an instant Khosatral floundered, smothered and blinded by the clinging stuff that resisted his strength as wood or steel could not have done, and in that instant Conan caught up his simitar and shot out into the corridor. Without checking his speed he hurled himself through the door of the adjoining chamber, slammed the door and shot the bolt.

Then as he wheeled he stopped short, all the blood in him seeming to surge to his head. Crouching on a heap of silk cushions, golden hair streaming over her naked shoulders, eyes blank with terror, was the woman for whom he had dared so much. He almost forgot the horror at his heels until a splintering crash behind him brought him to his senses. He caught up the girl and sprang for the opposite door. She was too helpless with fright either to resist or to aid him. A faint whimper was the only sound of which she seemed capable.

Conan wasted no time trying the door. A shattering stroke of his simitar hewed the lock asunder, and as he sprang through to the stair that loomed beyond it, he saw the head and shoulders of Khosatral crash through the other door. The colossus was splintering the massive panels as if they were of cardboard.

Conan raced up the stair, carrying the big girl over one shoulder as easily as if she had been a child. Where he was going he had no idea, but the stair ended at the door of a round, domed chamber. Khosatral was coming up the stair behind them, silently as a wind of death, and as swiftly.

The chamber's walls were of solid steel, and so was the door. Conan shut it and dropped in place the great bars with which it was furnished. The thought struck him that this was Khosatral's chamber, where he locked himself in to sleep securely from the monsters he had loosed from the Pits to do his bidding.

HARDLY were the bolts in place when the great door shook and trembled to the giant's assault. Conan shrugged his shoulders. This was the end of the trail. There was no other door in the chamber, nor any window. Air, and the strange misty light, evidently came from interstices in the dome. He tested the nicked edge of his simitar, quite cool now that he was at bay. He had done his volcanic best to escape; when the giant came crashing through that door he would explode in another savage onslaught with his useless sword, not because he expected it to do any good, but because it was his nature to die fighting. For the moment there was no course of action to take, and his calmness was not forced or feigned.

The gaze he turned on his fair companion was as admiring and intense as if he had a hundred years to live. He had dumped her unceremoniously on the floor when he turned to close the door, and she had risen to her knees, mechanically arranging her streaming locks and her scanty garment. Conan's fierce eyes glowed with approval as they devoured her thick golden hair, her clear wide eyes, her milky skin, sleek with exuberant health, the firm swell of her breasts, the contours of her splendid hips.

A low cry escaped her as the door shook and a bolt gave way with a groan.

Conan did not look around. He knew the door would hold a little while longer.

"They told me you had escaped," he said. "A Yuetshi fisher told me you were hiding here. What is your name?"

"Octavia," she gasped mechanically. Then words came in a rush. She caught at him with desperate fingers. "Oh Mitra! what nightmare is this? The people—the dark-skinned people—one of them caught me in the forest and brought me here. They carried me to—to that—that *thing*. He told me—he said—am I mad? Is this a dream?"

He glanced at the door which bulged inward as if from the impact of a battering-ram.

"No," he said; "it's no dream. That hinge is giving way. Strange that a devil has to break down a door like a common man; but after all, his strength itself is a diabolism."

"Can you not kill him?" she panted. "You are strong."

Conan was too honest to lie to her. "If a mortal man could kill him, he'd be dead now," he answered. "I nicked my blade on his belly."

Her eyes dulled. "Then you must die, and I must—oh Mitra!" she screamed in sudden frenzy, and Conan caught her hands, fearing that she would harm herself. "He told me what he was going to do to me!" she panted. "Kill me! Kill me with your sword before he bursts the door!"

Conan looked at her, and shook his head.

"I'll do what I can," he said. "That won't be much, but it'll give you a chance to get past him down the stair. Then run for the cliffs. I have a boat tied at the foot of the steps. If you can get out of the palace you may escape him yet. The people of this city are all asleep."

She dropped her head in her hands. Conan took up his simitar and moved over to stand before the echoing door. One watching him would not have realized that he was waiting for a death he regarded as inevitable. His eyes smoldered more vividly; his muscular hand knotted harder on his hilt; that was all.

The hinges had given under the giant's terrible assault and the door rocked crazily, held only by the bolts. And these solid steel bars were buckling, bending, bulging out of their sockets. Conan watched in an almost impersonal fascination, envying the monster his inhuman strength.

Then without warning the bombardment ceased. In the stillness Conan heard other noises on the landing outside—the beat of wings, and a muttering voice that was like the whining of wind through midnight branches. Then presently there was silence, but there was a new *feel* in the air. Only the whetted instincts of barbarism could have sensed it, but Conan knew, without seeing or hearing him leave, that the master of Dagon no longer stood outside the door.

He glared through a crack that had been started in the steel of the portal. The landing was empty. He drew the warped bolts and cautiously pulled aside the sagging door. Khosatral was not on the stair, but far below he heard the clang of a metal door. He did not know whether the giant was plotting new deviltries or had been summoned away by that muttering voice, but he wasted no time in conjectures.

He called to Octavia, and the new note in his voice brought her up to her feet and to his side almost without her conscious volition.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"Don't stop to talk!" He caught her wrist. "Come on!" The chance for action had transformed him; his eyes blazed,

his voice crackled. "The knife!" he muttered, while almost dragging the girl down the stair in his fierce haste. "The magic Yuetshi blade! He left it in the dome! I——" his voice died suddenly as a clear mental picture sprang up before him. That dome adjoined the great room where stood the copper throne—sweat started out on his body. The only way to that dome was through that room with its copper throne and the foul thing that slumbered in it.

But he did not hesitate. Swiftly they descended the stair, crossed the chamber, descended the next stair, and came into the great dim hall with its mysterious hangings. They had seen no sign of the colossus. Halting before the great bronze-valved door, Conan caught Octavia by her shoulders and shook her in his intensity.

"Listen!" he snapped. "I'm going into that room and fasten the door. Stand here and listen; if Khosatral comes, call to me. If you hear me cry out for you to go, run as though the devil were on your heels—which he probably will be. Make for that door at the other end of the hall, because I'll be past helping you. I'm going for the Yuetshi knife!"

Before she could voice the protest her lips were framing, he had slid through the valves and shut them behind him. He lowered the bolt cautiously, not noticing that it could be worked from the outside. In the dim twilight his gaze sought that grim copper throne; yes, the scaly brute was still there, filling the throne with its loathsome coils. He saw a door behind the throne and knew that it led into the dome. But to reach it he must mount the dais, a few feet from the throne itself.

A wind blowing across the green floor would have made more noise than Conan's slinking feet. Eyes glued on the sleeping reptile he reached the dais and mounted the glass steps. The snake had not moved. He was reaching for the door. . . .

The bolt on the bronze portal clanged and Conan stifled an awful oath as he saw Octavia come into the room. She stared about, uncertain in the deeper gloom, and he stood frozen, not daring to shout a warning. Then she saw his shadowy figure and ran toward the dais, crying: "I want to go with you! I'm afraid to stay alone—*oh!*" She threw up her hands with a terrible scream as for the first time she saw the occupant of the throne. The wedge-shaped head had lifted from its coils and thrust out toward her on a yard of shining neck.

Then with a smooth flowing motion it began to ooze from the throne, coil by coil, its ugly head bobbing in the direction of the paralyzed girl.

CONAN cleared the space between him and the throne with a desperate bound, his simitar swinging with all his power. And with such blinding speed did the serpent move that it whipped about and met him in full midair, lapping his limbs and body with half a dozen coils. His half-checked stroke fell futilely as he crashed down on the dais, gashing the scaly trunk but not severing it.

Then he was writhing on the glass steps with fold after slimy fold knotting about him, twisting, crushing, killing him. His right arm was still free, but he could get no purchase to strike a killing blow, and he knew one blow must suffice. With a groaning convulsion of muscular expansion that bulged his veins almost to bursting on his temples and tied his muscles in quivering, tortured knots, he heaved up on his feet, lifting almost the full weight of that forty-foot devil.

An instant he reeled on wide-braced legs, feeling his ribs caving in on his

vitals and his sight growing dark, while his simitar gleamed above his head. Then it fell, shearing through the scales and flesh and vertebræ. And where there had been one huge writhing cable, now there were horribly two, lashing and flopping in the death throes. Conan staggered away from their blind strokes. He was sick and dizzy, and blood oozed from his nose. Groping in a dark mist he clutched Octavia and shook her until she gasped for breath.

"Next time I tell you to stay somewhere," he gasped, "you stay!"

He was too dizzy even to know whether she replied. Taking her wrist like a truant schoolgirl, he led her around the hideous stumps that still looped and knotted on the floor. Somewhere, in the distance, he thought he heard men yelling, but his ears were still roaring so that he could not be sure.

The door gave to his efforts. If Khosatral had placed the snake there to guard the thing he feared, evidently he considered it ample precaution. Conan half expected some other monstrosity to leap at him with the opening of the door, but in the dimmer light he saw only the vague sweep of the arch above, a dully gleaming block of gold, and a half-moon glimmer on the stone.

With a gasp of gratification he scooped it up, and did not linger for further exploration. He turned and fled across the room and down the great hall toward the distant door that he felt led to the outer air. He was correct. A few minutes later he emerged into the silent streets, half carrying, half guiding his companion. There was no one to be seen, but beyond the western wall there sounded cries and moaning wails that made Octavia tremble. He led her to the southwestern wall, and without difficulty found a stone stair that mounted the rampart. He had appropriated a thick tapestry rope in the great hall, and now, having reached the parapet, he looped the soft strong cord about the girl's hips and lowered her to the earth. Then, making one end fast to a merlon, he slid down after her. There was but one way of escape from the island —the stair on the western cliffs. In that direction he hurried, swinging wide around the spot from which had come the cries and the sound of terrible blows.

Octavia sensed that grim peril lurked in those leafy fastnesses. Her breath came pantingly and she pressed close to her protector. But the forest was silent now, and they saw no shape of menace until they emerged from the trees and glimpsed a figure standing on the edge of the cliffs.

Jehungir Agha had escaped the doom that had overtaken his warriors when an iron giant sallied suddenly from the gate and battered and crushed them into bits of shredded flesh and splintered bone. When he saw the swords of his archers break on that man-like juggernaut, he had known it was no human foe they faced, and he had fled, hiding in the deep woods until the sounds of slaughter ceased. Then he crept back to the stair, but his boatmen were not waiting for him.

They had heard the screams, and presently, waiting nervously, had seen, on the cliff above them, a blood-smeared monster waving gigantic arms in awful triumph. They had waited for no more. When Jehungir came upon the cliffs they were just vanishing among the reeds beyond ear-shot. Khosatral was gone—had either returned to the city or was prowling the forest in search of the man who had escaped him outside the walls.

JEHUNGIR was just preparing to descend the stairs and depart in Conan's boat, when he saw the *hetman* and the girl emerge from the trees. The expe-

rience which had congealed his blood and almost blasted his reason had not altered Jehungir's intentions toward the *kozak* chief. The sight of the man he had come to kill filled him with gratification. He was astonished to see the girl he had given to Jelal Khan, but he wasted no time on her. Lifting his bow he drew the shaft to its head and loosed. Conan crouched and the arrow splintered on a tree, and Conan laughed.

"Dog!" he taunted. "You can't hit me! I was not born to die on Hyrkanian steel! Try again, pig of Turan!"

Jehungir did not try again. That was his last arrow. He drew his simitar and advanced, confident in his spired helmet and close-meshed mail. Conan met him half-way in a blinding whirl of swords. The curved blades ground together, sprang apart, circled in glittering arcs that blurred the sight which tried to follow them. Octavia, watching, did not see the stroke, but she heard its chopping impact, and saw Jehungir fall, blood spurting from his side where the Cimmerian's steel had sundered his mail and bitten to his spine.

But Octavia's scream was not caused by the death of her former master. With a crash of bending boughs Khosatral Khel was upon them. The girl could not flee; a moaning cry escaped her as her knees gave way and pitched her grovelling to the sward.

Conan, stooping above the body of the Agha, made no move to escape. Shifting his reddened simitar to his left hand, he drew the great half-blade of the Yuetshi. Khosatral Khel was towering above him, his arms lifted like mauls, but as the blade caught the sheen of the sun, the giant gave back suddenly.

But Conan's blood was up. He rushed in, slashing with the crescent blade. And it did not splinter. Under its edge the dusky metal of Khosatral's body gave way like common flesh beneath a cleaver. From the deep gash flowed a strange ichor, and Khosatral cried out like the dirging of a great bell. His terrible arms flailed down, but Conan, quicker than the archers who had died beneath those awful flails, avoided their strokes and struck again and yet again. Khosatral reeled and tottered; his cries were awful to hear, as if metal were given a tongue of pain, as if iron shrieked and bellowed under torment.

Then wheeling away he staggered into the forest; he reeled in his gait, crashed through bushes and caromed off trees. Yet though Conan followed him with the speed of hot passion, the walls and towers of Dagon loomed through the trees before the man came within dagger-reach of the giant.

Then Khosatral turned again, flailing the air with desperate blows, but Conan, fired to berserk fury, was not to be denied. As a panther strikes down a bull moose at bay, so he plunged under the bludgeoning arms and drove the crescent blade to the hilt under the spot where a human's heart would be.

Khosatral reeled and fell. In the shape of a man he reeled, but it was not the shape of a man that struck the loam. Where there had been the likeness of a human face, there was no face at all, and the metal limbs melted and changed. . . . Conan, who had not shrunk from Khosatral living, recoiled blenching from Khosatral dead, for he had witnessed an awful transmutation; in his dying throes Khosatral Khel had become again the *thing* that had crawled up from the Abyss millenniums gone. Gagging with intolerable repugnance, Conan turned to flee the sight; and he was suddenly aware that the pinnacles of Dagon no longer glimmered through the trees. They had faded like smoke—the battlements, the crenellated

towers, the great bronze gates, the velvets, the gold, the ivory, and the dark-haired women, and the men with their shaven skulls. With the passing of the inhuman intellect which had given them rebirth, they had faded back into the dust which they had been for ages uncounted. Only the stumps of broken columns rose above crumbling walls and broken paves and shattered dome. Conan again looked upon the ruins of Xapur as he remembered them.

THE wild *hetman* stood like a statue for a space, dimly grasping something of the cosmic tragedy of the fitful ephemera called mankind and the hooded shapes of darkness which prey upon it. Then as he heard his voice called in accents of fear, he started, as one awaking from a dream, glanced again at the thing on the ground, shuddered and turned away toward the cliffs and the girl that waited there.

She was peering fearfully under the trees, and she greeted him with a half-stifled cry of relief. He had shaken off the dim monstrous visions which had momentarily haunted him, and was his exuberant self again.

"Where is *he?*" she shuddered.

"Gone back to hell whence he crawled," he replied cheerfully. "Why didn't you climb the stair and make your escape in my boat?"

"I wouldn't desert——" she began, then changed her mind, and amended rather sulkily, "I have nowhere to go. The Hyrkanians would enslave me again, and the pirates would——"

"What of the *kozaks?*" he suggested.

"Are they better than the pirates?" she asked scornfully. Conan's admiration increased to see how well she had recovered her poise after having endured such frantic terror. Her arrogance amused him.

"You seemed to think so in the camp by Ghori," he answered. "You were free enough with your smiles then."

Her red lip curled in disdain. "Do you think I was enamored of you? Do you dream that I would have shamed myself before an ale-guzzling, meat-gorging barbarian unless I had to? My master—whose body lies there—forced me to do as I did."

"Oh!" Conan seemed rather crestfallen. Then he laughed with undiminished zest. "No matter. You belong to me now. Give me a kiss."

"You dare ask——" she began angrily, when she felt herself snatched off her feet and crushed to the *hetman's* muscular breast. She fought him fiercely, with all the supple strength of her magnificent youth, but he only laughed exuberantly, drunk with the possession of this splendid creature writhing in his arms.

He crushed her struggles easily, drinking the nectar of her lips with all the unrestrained passion that was his, until the arms that strained against him melted and twined convulsively about his massive neck. Then he laughed down into the clear eyes, and said: "Why should not a chief of the Free People be preferable to a city-bred dog of Turan?"

She shook back her tawny locks, still tingling in every nerve from the fire of his kisses. She did not loosen her arms from his neck. "Do you deem yourself an Agha's equal?" she challenged.

He laughed and strode with her in his arms toward the stair. "You shall judge," he boasted. "I'll burn Khawarizm for a torch to light your way to my tent."

Dust of Gods

By C. L. MOORE

"Smith swung over first, lowering himself cautiously."

A fascinating story, stupendous in its scope, about a terrific adventure and the funeral pyre of one of the elder gods—by the author of "Shambleau"

"PASS the whisky, N. W.," said Yarol the Venusian persuasively.

Northwest Smith shook the black bottle of Venusian *segir*-whisky tentatively, evoked a slight gurgle, and reached for his friend's glass. Under the Venusian's jealous dark gaze he measured out exactly half of the red liquid. It was not very much.

Yarol regarded his share of the drink disconsolately.

"Broke again," he murmured. "And me so thirsty." His glance of cherubic innocence flashed along the temptingly laden counters of the Martian saloon wherein they sat. His face with its look of holy innocence turned to Smith's, the wise black gaze meeting the Earthman's

pale-steel look questioningly. Yarol lifted an arched brow.

"How about it?" he suggested delicately. "Mars owes us a drink anyhow, and I just had my heat-gun recharged this morning. I think we could get away with it."

Under the table he laid a hopeful hand on his gun. Smith grinned and shook his head.

"Too many customers," he said. "And you ought to know better than to start anything here. It isn't healthful."

Yarol shrugged resigned shoulders and drained his glass with a gulp.

"Now what?" he demanded.

"Well, look around. See anyone here you know? We're open for business—any kind."

Yarol twirled his glass wistfully and studied the crowded room from under his lashes. With those lashes lowered he might have passed for a choir-boy in any of Earth's cathedrals. But too dark a knowledge looked out when they rose for that illusion to continue long.

It was a motley crowd the weary black gaze scrutinized—hard-faced Earthmen in space-sailors' leather, sleek Venusians with their sidelong, dangerous eyes, Martian drylanders muttering the blasphemous gutturals of their language, a sprinkling of outlanders and half-brutes from the wide-flung borders of civilization. Yarol's eyes returned to the dark, scarred face across the table. He met the pallor of Smith's no-colored gaze and shrugged.

"No one who'd buy us a drink," he sighed. "I've seen one or two of 'em before, though. Take those two space-rats at the next table: the little red-faced Earthman — the one looking over his shoulder—and the drylander with an eye gone. See? I've heard they're—hunters."

"What for?"

Yarol lifted his shoulders in the expressive Venusian shrug. His brows rose too, quizzically.

"No one knows what they hunt—but they run together."

"Hm-m." Smith turned a speculative stare toward the neighboring table. "They look more hunted than hunting, if you ask me."

Yarol nodded. The two seemed to share one fear between them, if over-the-shoulder glances and restless eyes spoke truly. They huddled together above their *segir* glasses, and though they had the faces of hard men, inured to the space-way dangers, the look on those faces was curiously compounded of many unpleasant things underlying a frank, unreasoning alarm. It was a look Smith could not quite fathom—a haunted, uneasy dread with nameless things behind it.

"They do look as if Black Pharol were one jump behind," said Yarol. "Funny, too. I've always heard they were pretty tough, both of 'em. You have to be in their profession."

Said a husky half-whisper in their very ears,

"Perhaps they found what they were hunting."

It produced an electric stillness. Smith moved almost imperceptibly sidewise in his chair, the better to clear his gun, and Yarol's slim fingers hovered above his hip. They turned expressionless faces toward the speaker.

A little man sitting alone at the next table had bent forward to fix them with a particularly bright stare. They met it in silence, hostile and waiting, until the husky half-whisper spoke again.

"May I join you? I couldn't help overhearing that—that you were open for business."

Without expression Smith's colorless eyes summed up the speaker, and a puzzlement clouded their paleness as he

looked. Rarely does one meet a man whose origin and race are not apparent even upon close scrutiny. Yet here was one whom he could not classify. Under the deep burn of the man's skin might be concealed a fair Venusian pallor or an Earthman bronze, canal-Martian rosiness or even a leathery dryland hide. His dark eyes could have belonged to any race, and his husky whisper, fluent in the jargon of the spaceman, effectively disguised its origin. Little and unobtrusive, he might have passed for native on any of the three planets.

Smith's scarred, impassive face did not change as he looked, but after a long moment of scrutiny he said, "Pull up," and then bit off the words as if he had said too much.

The brevity must have pleased the little man, for he smiled as he complied, meeting the passively hostile stare of the two without embarrassment. He folded his arms on the table and leaned forward. The husky voice began without preamble,

"I can offer you employment—if you're not afraid. It's dangerous work, but the pay's good enough to make up for it—if you're not afraid."

"What is it?"

"Work they — those two — failed at. They were—hunters—until they found what they hunted. Look at them now."

SMITH'S no-colored eyes did not swerve from the speaker's face, but he nodded. No need to look again upon the fear-ridden faces of the neighboring pair. He understood.

"What's the job?" he asked.

The little man hitched his chair closer and sent a glance round the room from under lowered lids. He scanned the faces of his two companions half doubtfully. He said, "There have been many gods since time's beginning," then paused and peered dubiously into Smith's face.

Northwest nodded briefly. "Go on," he said.

Reassured, the little man took up his tale, and before he had gone far enthusiasm drowned out the doubtfulness in his husky voice, and a tinge of fanaticism crept in.

"There were gods who were old when Mars was a green planet, and a verdant moon circled an Earth blue with steaming seas, and Venus, molten-hot, swung round a younger sun. Another world circled in space then, between Mars and Jupiter where its fragments, the planetoids, now are. You will have heard rumors of it—they persist in the legends of every planet. It was a mighty world, rich and beautiful, peopled by the ancestors of mankind. And on that world dwelt a mighty Three in a temple of crystal, served by strange slaves and worshipped by a world. They were not wholly abstract, as most modern gods have become. Some say they were from Beyond, and real, in their way, as flesh and blood.

"Those three gods were the origin and beginning of all other gods that mankind has known. All modern gods are echoes of them, in a world that has forgotten the very name of the Lost Planet. Saig they called one, and Lsa was the second. You will never have heard of them—they died before your world's hot seas had cooled. No man knows how they vanished, or why, and no trace of them is left anywhere in the universe we know. But there was a Third—a mighty Third set above these two and ruling the Lost Planet; so mighty a Third that even today, unthinkably long afterward, his name has not died from the lips of man. It has become a byword now—his name, that once no living man dared utter! I

heard you call upon him not ten minutes past—Black Pharol!"

His husky voice sank to a quiver as it spoke the hackneyed name. Yarol gave a sudden snort of laughter, quickly hushed, and said,

"Pharol! Why——"

"Yes, I know. Pharol, today, means unmentionable rites to an ancient no-god of utter darkness. Pharol has sunk so low that his very name denotes nothingness. But in other days—ah, in other days! Black Pharol has not always been a blur of dark worshipped with obscenity. In other days men knew what things that darkness hid, nor dared pronounce the name you laugh at, lest unwittingly they stumble upon that secret twist of its inflection which opens the door upon the dark that is Pharol. Men have been engulfed before now in the utter blackness of the god, and in that dark have seen fearful things. I know"—the raw voice trailed away into a murmur—"such fearful things that a man might scream his throat hoarse and never speak again above a whisper. . . ."

Smith's eyes flicked Yarol's. The husky murmur went on after a moment,

"So you see the old gods have not died utterly. They can never die as we know death: they come from too far Beyond to know either death or life as we do. They came from so very far that to touch us at all they had to take a visible form among mankind—to incarnate themselves in a material body through which, as through a door, they might reach out and touch the bodies and minds of men. The form they chose does not matter now—I do not know it. It was a material thing, and it has gone to dust so long ago that the very memory of its shape has vanished from the minds of men. But that dust still exists. Do you hear me? That dust which was once the first and the greatest of all gods, still exists! It was that which those men hunted. It was that they found, and fled in deadly terror of what they saw there. You look to be made of firmer stuff. Will you take up the search where they left it?"

Smith's pale stare met Yarol's black one across the table. Silence hung between them for a moment. Then Smith said,

"Any objection to us having a little talk with those two over there?"

"None at all," answered the hoarse whisper promptly. "Go now, if you like."

SMITH rose without further words. Yarol pushed back his chair noiselessly and followed him. They crossed the floor with the spaceman's peculiar, shifting walk and slid into opposite chairs between the huddling two.

The effect was startling. The Earthman jerked convulsively and turned a pasty face, eloquent with alarm, toward the interruption. The drylander stared from Smith's face to Yarol's in dumb terror. Neither spoke.

"Know that fellow over there?" inquired Smith abruptly, jerking his head toward the table they had quitted.

After a moment's hesitation the two heads turned as one. When they faced around again the terror on the Earthman's face was giving way to a dawning comprehension. He said from a dry throat,

"He—he's hiring you, eh?"

Smith nodded. The Earthman's face crumpled into terror again and he cried wildly,

"Don't do it! For God's sake, you don't know!"

"Know what?"

The man glanced furtively round the room and licked his lips uncertainly. A curious play of conflicting emotions flickered across his face.

"Dangerous——" he mumbled. "Better leave well enough alone. We found that out."

"What happened?"

The Earthman stretched out a shaking hand for the *segir* bottle and poured a brimming glass. He drained it before he spoke, and the incoherence of his speech may have been due to the glasses that had preceded it.

"We went up toward the polar mountains, where he said. Weeks . . . it was cold. The nights get dark up there . . . dark. Went into the cave that goes through the mountain—a long way. . . . Then our lights went out—full-charged batteries in new super-Tomlinson tubes, but they went out like candles, and in the dark — in the dark the white thing came. . . ."

A shudder went over him strongly. He reached out shaking hands for the *segir* bottle and poured another glass, the rim clicking against his teeth as he drank. Then he set down the glass hard and said violently,

"That's all. We left. Don't remember a thing about getting out—or much more than starving and freezing in the saltlands for a long time. Our supplies ran low—hadn't been for him"—nodding across the table—"we'd both have died. Don't know how we did get out finally—but we're out, understand? Out! Nothing could hire us to go back—we've seen enough. There's something about it that — that makes your head ache — we saw . . . never mind. But——"

He beckoned Smith closer and sank his voice to a whisper. His eyes rolled fearfully.

"It's after us. Don't ask me what . . . I don't know. But—feel it in the dark, watching—watching in the dark. . . ."

The voice sank to a mumble and he reached again for the *segir* bottle.

"It's here now—waiting—if the lights go out—watching—mustn't let the lights go out—more *segir*. . . ."

The bottle clinked on the glass-rim, the voice trailed away into drunken mutterings.

Smith pushed back his chair and nodded to Yarol. The two at the table did not seem to notice their departure. The drylander was clutching the *segir* bottle in turn and pouring out red liquid without watching the glass—an apprehensive one-eyed stare turned across his shoulder.

Smith laid a hand on his companion's shoulder and drew him across the room toward the bar. Yarol scowled at the approaching bartender and suggested,

"Suppose we get an advance for drinks, anyhow."

"Are we taking it?"

"Well, what d'you think?"

"It's dangerous. You know, there's something worse than whisky wrong with those two. Did you notice the Earthman's eyes?"

"Whites showed all around," nodded Yarol. "I've seen madmen look like that."

"I thought of that, too. He was drunk, of course, and probably wouldn't be so wild-sounding, sober—but from the looks of him he'll never be sober again till he dies. No use trying to find out anything more from him. And the other—well, did you ever try to find out anything from a drylander? Even a sober one?"

Yarol lifted expressive shoulders.

"I know. If we go into this, we go blind. Never dig any more out of those drunks. But something certainly scared them."

"And yet," said Smith, "I'd like to know more about this. Dust of gods—and all that. Interesting. Just what does he want with this dust, anyhow?"

"Did you believe that yarn?"

"Don't know—I've come across some pretty funny things here and there. He does act half-cracked, of course, but—well, those fellows back there certainly found *something* out of the ordinary, and they didn't go all the way at that."

"Well, if he'll buy us a drink I say let's take the job," said Yarol. "I'd as soon be scared to death later as die of thirst now. What do you say?"

"Good enough," shrugged Smith. "I'm thirsty, too."

THE little man looked up hopefully as they reseated themselves at the table.

"If we can come to terms," said Smith, "we'll take it. And if you can give us some idea of what we're looking for, and why."

"The dust of Pharol," said the husky voice impatiently. "I told you that."

"What d'you want with it?"

The little bright eyes stared suspiciously across the table into Smith's calm gaze.

"What business is it of yours?"

"We're risking our necks for it, aren't we?"

Again the bright, small eyes bored into the Earthman's. The husky voice fell lower, to the very echo of a whisper, and he said, secretly,

"I'll tell you, then. After all, why not? You don't know how to use it—it's of no value to anyone but me. Listen, then—I told you that the Three incarnated themselves into a material form to use as a door through which they could reach humanity. They had to do it, but it was a door that opened both ways—through it, if one dared, man could reach the Three. No one dared in those days—the power beyond was too terrible. It would have been like walking straight through a gateway into hell. But time has passed since then. The gods have drawn away from humanity into farther realms. The terror that was Pharol is only an echo in a forgetful world. The spirit of the god has gone—but not wholly. While any remnant of that shape which was once incarnate Pharol exists, Pharol can be reached. For the man who could lay hands on that dust, knowing the requisite rites and formulæ, all knowledge, all power would lie open like a book. To enslave a god!"

The raw whisper rasped to a crescendo; fanatic lights flared in the small, bright eyes. He had forgotten them utterly—his piercing stare was fixed on some shining future, and his hands on the table clenched into white-knuckled fists.

Smith and Yarol exchanged dubious glances. Obviously the man was mad. . . .

"Fifty thousand dollars to your account in any bank you choose," the hoarse voice, eminently sane, broke in abruptly upon their dubiety. "All expenses, of course, will be paid. I'll give you charts and tell you all I know about how to get there. When can you start?"

Smith grinned. Touched the man might be, but just then Smith would have stormed the gates of hell, at any madman's request, for fifty thousand Earth dollars.

"Right now," he said laconically. "Let's go."

2

NORTHWARD over the great curve of Mars, red slag and red dust and the reddish, low-lying dryland vegetation give way to the saltlands around the Pole. Scrub grows there, and sparse, coarse grass, and the snow that falls by night lies all the cold, thin day among the tough grass-roots and in the hillocks of the dry salt soil.

"Of all the God-forsaken countries," said Northwest Smith, looking down

from his pilot seat at the gray lands slipping past under the speed of their plane, "this must be the very worst. I'd sooner live on Luna or one of the asteroids."

Yarol tilted the *segir* bottle to his lips and evoked an eloquent gurgle from its depths.

"Five days of flying over this scenery would give anyone the jitters," he pronounced. "I'd never have thought I'd be glad to see a mountain range as ugly as that, but it looks like Paradise now," and he nodded toward the black, jagged slopes of the polar mountains that marked their journey's end so far as flying was concerned; for despite their great antiquity the peaks were jagged and rough as mountains new-wrenched from a heaving world.

Smith brought the plane down at the foot of the rising black slopes. There was a triangular gap there with a streak of white down its side, a landmark he had been watching for, and the plane slid quietly into the shelter to lie protected under the shelving rock. From here progress must be made afoot and painfully through the mountains. There was no landing-place any nearer their goal than this. Yet in measure of distance they had not far to go.

The two climbed stiffly out. Smith stretched his long legs and sniffed the air. It was bitterly cold, and tinged with that nameless, dry salt smell of eon-dead seas which is encountered nowhere in the known universe save in the northern saltlands of Mars. He faced the mountains doubtfully. From their beginnings here, he knew, they rolled away, jagged and black and deadly, to the very Pole. Snow lay thickly upon them in the brief Martian winter, unmarked by any track until it melted for the canals, carving deeper runnels into the already jig-sawed peaks.

Once in the very long-past days, so the little whispering fanatic had said, Mars was a green world. Seas had spread here, lapping the feet of gentler mountains, and in the slopes of those hills a mighty city once lay—a nameless city, so far as the present generations of man remembered, and a nameless star shone down upon it from a spot in the heavens now empty—the Lost Planet, shining on a lost city. The dwellers there must have seen the catastrophe which blasted that sister planet from the face of the sky. And if the little man were right, the gods of that Lost Planet had been saved from the wreckage and spirited across the void to a dwelling-place in this greatly honored city of the mountains that is not even a memory today.

And time passed, so the story went. The city aged—the gods aged—the planet aged. At last, in some terrible catastrophe, the planet heaved under the city's foundations, the mountains shook it into ruins and folded themselves into new and dreadful shapes. The seas receded, the fertile soil sluffed away from the rocks and time swallowed up the very memory of that city which once had been the dwelling-place of gods—which was still, so the hoarse whisper had told them, the dwelling-place of gods.

"Must have been right around here somewhere," said Smith, "that those two found the cave."

"Out around the slope to the left," agreed Yarol. "Let's go." He squinted up at the feeble sun. "Not very long past dawn. We ought to be back again by dark if things go right."

They left the ship in its shelter and struck out across the salt drylands, the harsh scrub brushing about their knees and their breath clouding the thin air as they advanced. The slope curved away to the left, rising in rapid ascent to black peaks that were unscalable and forbid-

ding. The only hope of penetrating that wall lay in finding the cavern that their predecessors had fled . . . and in that cavern—Smith loosened the heat-gun in its holster at his side.

THEY had plodded for fifteen minutes through the scrub, dry snow rising under their feet and the harsh salt air frosting their breath, before the mouth of the cave they were hunting appeared darkly under the overhanging rock they had been told of.

The two peered in doubtfully. That jagged floor might never have known the tread of human feet, so far as one might know by the look of it. Powdered snow lay undisturbed in the deep crannies, and daylight did not penetrate very far into the forbidding dark beyond. Smith drew his gun, took a deep breath and plunged into the blackness and the cold, with Yarol at his heels.

It was like leaving everything human and alive for some frosty limbo that had never known life. The cold struck sharply through their leather garments. They took out their Tomlinson tubes before they had gone more than twenty paces, and the twin beams illumined a scene of utter desolation, more dead than death, for it seemed never to have known life.

For perhaps fifteen minutes they stumbled through the cold dark. Smith kept his beam focused on the floor beneath them; Yarol's roved the walls and pierced the blackness ahead. Rough walls and ragged ceiling and teeth of broken stone projecting from the floor to slash at their boots—no sound but their footsteps, nothing but the dark and the frost and the silence. Then Yarol said, "It's foggy in here," and something clouded the clear beams of the lights for an instant; then darkness folded round them as suddenly and completely as the folds of a cloak.

Smith stopped dead-still, tense and listening. No sound. He felt the lens of his light-tube and knew that it still burned—it was warm, and the faint vibration under the glass told him that the tubes still functioned. But something intangible and strange blotted it out at the source . . . a thick, stifling blackness that seemed to muffle their senses. It was like a bandage over the eyes—Smith, holding the burning light-lens to his eyes, could not detect even its outline in that all-cloaking dark.

For perhaps five minutes that dead blackness held them. Vaguely they knew what to expect, but when it came, the shock of it took their breath away. There was no sound, but quite suddenly around a bend of the cavern came a figure of utter whiteness, seen at first fragmentarily through a screen of rock-toothed jags, then floating full into view against the background of the dark. Smith thought he had never seen whiteness before until his incredulous eyes beheld this creature—if creature it could be. Somehow he thought it must be partly below the level of the floor along which it moved; for though in that blind black he had no way of gaging elevation, it seemed to him that the apparition, moving with an effortless glide, advanced unopposed through the solid rock of the floor. And it was whiter than anything living or dead had ever been before—so white that it sickened him, somehow, and the flesh crept along his spine. Like a cut-out figure of paper, it blazed against the flat black beyond. The dark did not affect it, no shadows lay upon its surface; in two arbitrary dimensions only, blind white superimposed upon blind dark, it floated toward them. And it was tall, and somehow man-formed, but of no shape that words could describe.

Smith heard Yarol catch his breath in

a gasp behind him. He heard no other sound, though the whiteness floated swiftly forward *through* the rocky floor. He was sure of that now—a part of it extended farther down than his feet, and they were planted upon solid rock. And though his skin crawled with unreasoning terror, and the hair on his neck prickled with the weird, impossible approach of the impossible thing, he kept his head enough to see that it was apparently solid, yet somehow milkily translucent; that it had form and depth, though no shadows of that darkness lay upon it; that from where no face should have been, a blind, eyeless visage fronted him impassively. It was very close now, and though the extremities of it trailed below the floor line, its height lifted far above his head.

And a nameless, blind force beat out from it and assailed him, a force that somehow seemed to be driving him into unnamable things—an urge to madness, beating at his brain with the reasonless buffeting of insanity, but a wilder, more incomprehensible insanity than the sane mind could understand.

Something frantic within him clamored for instant, headlong flight — he heard Yarol's breathing panicky behind him and knew that he too wavered on the verge of bolting—but something insistent at the roots of his brain held him firm before the whiteness bearing down in its aura of madness—something that denied the peril, that hinted at solution. . . .

Scarcely realizing that he had moved, he found the heat-gun in his hand, and on a sudden impulse jerked his arm up and sent a long, blue-hot streamer of flame straight at the advancing apparition. For the briefest of instants the blue dazzle flashed a light-blade through the dark. It struck the floating whiteness full—vanished—Smith heard a faint crackle of sparks on the invisible floor beyond and knew that it had passed through the creature without meeting resistance. And in that flashing second while the blue blaze split the thickness of the dark he saw it shine luridly upon a splinter of rock in its path, but not upon the white figure. No blaze of blueness affected the deathly pallor of it—he had a sudden conviction that though a galaxy of colored lights were played upon it no faintest hint of color could ever tinge it with any of man's hues. Fighting the waves of madness that buffeted at his brain, he realized painfully that it must be beyond the reach of men—and therefore——

He laughed unsteadily and holstered his gun.

"Come on," he yelled to Yarol, reaching out blindly to grasp his comrade's arm, and—suppressing a tingle of terror—plunged straight through that towering horror.

THERE was an instant of blaze and blinding whiteness, a moment of turmoil while dizziness swirled round him and the floor rocked under his feet and a maelstrom of mad impulses battered through his brain; then everything was black again and he was plunging recklessly ahead through the dark, dragging a limply acquiescent Yarol behind him.

After a while of stumbling progress, punctuated with falls, while the white horror dropped away behind them, not following, though the muffling dark still sealed their eyes—the almost forgotten light in Smith's hand suddenly blazed forth again. In its light he faced Yarol, blinking at the abrupt illumination. The Venusian's face was a mask of question, his black eyes bright with inquiry.

"What happened? What was it? How did you—how could we——"

"It can't have been real," said Smith

with a shaky grin. "I mean, not material in the sense we know. Looked awful enough, but—well, there were too many things about it that didn't hitch up. Notice how it seemed to trail through the solid floor? And neither light nor dark affected it—it had no shadows, even in that blackness, and the flash of my gun didn't even give it a blue tinge. Then I remembered what that little fellow had told us about his three gods: that, though they had real existence, it was on such a widely different plane from ours that they couldn't touch us except by providing themselves with a material body. I think this thing was like that also: visible, but too other-dimensional to reach us except through sight. And when I saw that the floor didn't offer any resistance to it I thought that maybe, conversely, it wouldn't affect us either. And it didn't. We're through."

Yarol drew a deep breath.

"The master-mind," he gibed affectionately. "Wonder if anyone else ever figured that out, or are we the first to get through?"

"Don't know. Don't get the idea it was just a scarecrow, though. I think we moved none too soon. A minute or two longer and—and—I felt as if someone were stirring my brains with a stick. Nothing seemed—right. I think I know now what was wrong with those other two—they waited too long before they ran. Good thing we moved when we did."

"But what about that darkness?"

"I suppose we'll never really know. Must have had some relation to the other—the white thing, possibly some force or element out of that other dimension; because just as dark couldn't touch the whiteness of that thing, so light had no effect on the dark. I got the impression, somehow, that the dark space is a fixed area there, as if a section out of the other world has been set down in the cave, for the white thing to roam about in—a barrier of blackness across the way. And I don't suppose that it can move outside the darkness. But I may be wrong—let's go!"

"Right behind you!" said Yarol. "Get along."

The cave extended for another fifteen-minute walk, cold and silent and viciously rough underfoot, but no further mishap broke the journey. Tomlinson-lights gleaming, they traversed it, and the glow of cold day at the far end looked like the gleam of paradise after that journey through the heart of the dead rock.

They looked out upon the ruins of that city where once the gods had dwelt—ragged rock, great splintered teeth of stone upflung, the bare black mountainside folded and tortured into wild shapes of desolation. Here and there, buried in the debris of ages, lay huge six-foot blocks of hewn stone, the only reminder that here had stood Mars' holiest city, once, very long ago.

After five minutes of search Smith's eyes finally located the outline of what might, millions of years ago, have been a street. It led straight away from the slope at the cave-mouth, and the blocks of hewn stone, the crevices and folded ruins of earthquake choked it, but the course it once had run was not entirely obliterated even yet. Palaces and temples must have lined it once. There was no trace of them now save in the blocks of marble lying shattered among the broken stones. Time had erased the city from the face of Mars almost as completely as from the memories of man. Yet the trace of this one street was all they needed now to guide them.

THE going was rough. Once down among the ruins it was difficult to keep in the track, and for almost an hour

they clambered over broken rock and jagged spikes of stone, leaping the crevices, skirting great mounds of ruin. Both were scratched and breathless by the time they came to the first landmark they recognized—a black, leaning needle of stone, half buried in fragments of broken marble. Just beyond it lay two blocks of stone, one upon the other, perhaps the only two in the whole vast ruin which still stood as the hands of man had laid them hundreds of centuries ago.

Smith paused beside them and looked at Yarol, breathing a little heavily from exertion.

"Here it is," he said. "The old boy was telling the truth after all."

"So far," amended Yarol dubiously, drawing his heat-gun. "Well, we'll see."

The blue pencil of flame hissed from the gun's muzzle to spatter along the crack between the stones. Very slowly Yarol traced that line, and in spite of himself excitement quickened within him. Two-thirds of the way along the line the flame suddenly ceased to spatter and bit deep. A blackening hole appeared in the stone. It widened swiftly, and smoke rose, and there came a sound of protesting rock wrenched from its bed of eons as the upper stone slowly ground half around on the lower, tottered a moment and then fell.

The lower stone was hollow. The two bent over curiously, peering down. A tiny breath of unutterable antiquity rose in their faces out of that darkness, a little breeze from a million years ago. Smith flashed his light-tube downward and saw level stone a dozen feet below. The breeze was stronger now, and dust danced up the shaft from the mysterious depths—dust that had lain there undisturbed for unthinkably long ages.

"We'll give it a while to air out," said Smith, switching off his light. "Must be plenty of ventilation, to judge from that breeze, and the dust will probably blow away before long. We can be rigging up some sort of ladder while we wait."

By the time a knotted rope had been prepared and anchored about a near-by needle of rock the little wind was blowing cleanly up the shaft, still laden with that indefinable odor of ages, but breathable. Smith swung over first, lowering himself cautiously until his feet touched the stone. Yarol, when he came down, found him swinging the Tomlinson-beam about a scene of utter lifelessness. A passageway stretched before them, smoothly polished as to walls and ceiling, with curious, unheard-of frescoes limned in dim colors under the glaze. Antiquity hung almost tangibly in the air. The little breeze that brushed past their faces seemed sacrilegiously alive in this tomb of dead dynasties.

That glazed and patterned passageway led downward into the dark. They followed it dubiously, feet stirring in the dust of a dead race, light-beams violating the million-years night of the underground. Before they had gone very far the circle of light from the shaft disappeared from sight beyond the up-sloping floor behind them, and they walked through antiquity with nothing but the tiny, constant breeze upon their faces to remind them of the world above.

They walked a very long way. There was no subterfuge about the passage, no attempt to confuse the traveler. No other halls opened from it—it led straight forward and down through the stillness, the dark, the odor of very ancient death. And when at long last they reached the end, they had passed no other corridor-mouth, no other openings at all save the tiny ventilation holes at intervals along the ceiling.

At the end of that passage a curving

wall of rough, unworked stone bulged like the segment of a sphere, closing the corridor. It was a different stone entirely from that under the patterned glaze of the way along which they had come. In the light of their Tomlinson-tubes they saw a stone door set flush with the slightly bulging wall that held it. And in the door's very center a symbol was cut deep and vehement and black against the gray background. Yarol, seeing it, caught his breath.

"Do you know that sign?" he said softly, his voice reverberating in the stillness of the underground, and echoes whispered behind him down the darkness, "*—know that sign . . . know that sign?*"

"I can guess," murmured Smith, playing his light on the black outline of it.

"The symbol of Pharol," said the Venusian in a near-whisper, but the echoes caught it and rolled back along the passage in diminishing undertones, "*—Pharol . . . Pharol . . . Pharol!*"

"I saw it once carved in the rock of an asteroid," went on Yarol in a whisper. "Just a bare little fragment of dead stone whirling around and around through space. There was one smooth surface on it, and this same sign was cut there. The Lost Planet must really have existed, N. W., and that must have been a part of it once, with the god's name cut so deep that even the explosion of a world couldn't wipe it out."

Smith drew his gun.

"We'll soon know," he said. "This will probably fall, so stand back."

The blue pencil of heat traced the door's edges, spattering against the stone as Yarol's had in the city above. And as before, in its course it encountered the weak place in the molding and the fire bit deep. The door trembled as Smith held the beam steady; it uttered an ominous creaking and began slowly to tilt outward at the top. Smith snapped off his gun and leaped backward, as the great stone slab tottered outward and fell. The mighty crash of it reverberated through the dark, and the concussion of its fall shook the solid floor and flung both men staggering against the wall.

They reeled to their feet again, shielding blinded eyes from the torrent of radiance that poured forth out of the doorway. It was a rich, golden light, somehow thick, yet clear, and they saw almost immediately, as their eyes became accustomed to the sudden change from darkness, that it was like no light they had ever known before. Tangibly it poured past them down the corridor in hurrying waves that lapped one another and piled up and flowed as a gas might have done. It was light which had an unnamable body to it, a physical, palpable body which yet did not affect the air they breathed.

They walked forward into a sea of radiance, and that curious light actually eddied about their feet, rippling away from the forward motion of their bodies as water might have done. Widening circles spread away through the air as they advanced, breaking soundlessly against the wall, and behind them a trail of bright streaks streamed away like the wake of a ship in water.

Through the deeps of that rippling light they walked a passage hewn from ragged stone, a different stone from that of the outer corridor, and somehow older. Tiny speckles of brightness glinted now and again on the rough walls, and neither could remember ever having seen just such mottled, bright-flecked rock before.

"DO YOU know what I think this is?" demanded Smith suddenly, after a few minutes of silent progress over the uneven floor. "An asteroid! That rough

wall bulging into the corridor outside was the outer part of it. Remember, the three gods were supposed to have been carried away from the catastrophe on the other world and brought here. Well, I'll bet that's how it was managed—a fragment of that planet, enclosing a room, possibly, where the gods' images stood, was somehow detached from the Lost Planet and hurled across space to Mars. Must have buried itself in the ground here, and the people of this city tunneled in to it and built a temple over the spot. No other way, you see, to account for that protruding wall and the peculiar formation of this rock. It must have come from the lost world—never saw anything like it anywhere, myself."

"Sounds logical," admitted Yarol, swinging his foot to start an eddy of light toward the wall. "And what do you make of this funny light?"

"Whatever other-dimensional place those gods came from, we can be pretty sure that light plays funny thicks there. It must be nearly material—physical. You saw it in that white thing in the cave, and in the dark that smothered our tubes. It's as tangible as water, almost. You saw how it flowed out into the passage when the door fell, and not as real light does, but in succeeding waves, like heavy gas. Yet I don't notice any difference in the air. But I don't believe—say! Look at that!"

He stopped so suddenly that Yarol bumped into him from behind and muttered a mild Venusian oath. Then across Smith's shoulder he saw it too, and his hand swept downward to his gun. Something like an oddly shaped hole opening onto utter dark had appeared around the curve of the passage. And as they stared, it moved. It was a Something blacker than anything in human experience could ever have been before—as black as the guardian of the cave had been white—so black that the eye refused to compass it save as a negative quality, an emptiness. Smith, remembering the legends of Pharol the No-God of utter nothingness, gripped his gun more firmly and wondered if he stood face to face with one of the elder gods.

The Thing had shifted its shape, flowing to a stabler outline and standing higher from the floor. Smith felt that it must have form and thickness—at least three dimensions and probably more—but try though he would, his eyes could not discern it save as a flat outline of nothingness against the golden light.

And as from the white dweller in darkness, so from this black denizen of the light there flowed a force that goaded the brain to madness. Smith felt it battering in blind waves at the foundations of his mind—but he felt more than the reasonless urge in this force assailing him. He sensed a struggle of some sort, as if the black guardian were turning only a part of its attention to him—as if it fought against something unseen and powerful. Feeling this, he began to see signs of that combat in the black outlines of the thing. It rippled and flowed, its shape shifted fluidly, it writhed in protest against something he could not comprehend. Definitely now he felt that it fought a desperate battle with some unseen enemy, and a little shudder crawled down his back as he watched.

Quite suddenly it dawned upon him what was happening. Slowly, relentlessly, the black nothingness was being drawn down the passage. And it was—it must be—the flow of the golden radiance that drew it, as a fish might be carried forward down a stream. Somehow the opening of the door must have freed the pent-up lake of light, and it was flowing slowly out down the passage as water

flows, draining the asteroid, if asteroid it was. He could see now that though they had halted, the wake of rippling illumination behind them did not cease. Past them in a bright tide streamed the light. And on that outflowing torrent the black guardian floated, struggling but helpless.

It was closer now, and the beat of insistent impulses against Smith's brain was stronger, but he was not greatly alarmed by it. The panic of the thing must be deep, and the waves of force that washed about him were dizzying but not deep-reaching. Because of this increasing dizziness, as the thing approached, he was never sure afterward just what had happened. Rapidly it drew nearer, until he could have put out his hand and touched it—though instinctively he felt that, near as it seemed, it was too far away across dimensional gulfs for him ever to lay hand upon it. The blackness of it, at close range, was stupefying, a blackness that the eye refused to comprehend — that could not be, and was.

With the nearness of it his brain seemed to leave its moorings and plunge in mad, impossible curves through a suddenly opened space wherein the walls of the passage were shadows dimly seen and his own body no more than a pillar of mist in a howling void. The black thing must have rolled over him in passing, and engulfed him in its reasonless and incredible dark. He never knew. When his plunging brain finally ceased its lunges through the void and returned reluctantly to his body, the horror of nothingness had receded past them down the corridor, still struggling, and the waves of its blinding force weakened with the distance.

Yarol was leaning against the wall, wide-eyed and gasping.

"Did it get you, too?" he managed to articulate after several attempts to control his hurrying breath.

Smith found his own lungs laboring. He nodded, breathless.

"I wonder," he said when he had recovered a measure of normality, "if that thing would look as white in the dark as it did dark in the light? I'll bet it would. And do you suppose it can't exist outside the light? Reminded me of a jelly-fish caught in a mill-race. Say, if the light's flowing out that fast, d'you think it may go entirely? We'd better be moving."

UNDER their feet the passage sloped downward still. And when they reached the end of their quest, it came very suddenly. The curve of the passage sharpened to an angle, and round the bend the corridor ended abruptly at the threshold of a great cavity in the heart of the asteroid.

In the rich golden light it glittered like the center of a many-faceted diamond—that vast crystal room. The light brimmed it from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling. And it was strange that in that mellow flood of radiance the boundaries of the room seemed hard to define—somehow it looked limitless, though the walls were clear to be seen.

All this, though, they were realizing only subconsciously. Their eyes met the throne in the center of the crystal vault and clung there, fascinated. It was a crystal throne, and it had been fashioned for no human occupant. On this the mighty Three of measureless antiquity had sat. It was not an altar—it was a throne where incarnate godhood reigned once, too long ago for the mind to comprehend. Roughly triform, it glittered under the great arch of the ceiling. There was no knowing, from the shape of it now, what form the Three had worn who sat upon it. But the forms must have been outside modern

comprehension—nothing the two explorers had ever seen in all their wanderings could have occupied it.

Two of the pedestals were empty. Saig and Lsa had vanished as completely as their names from man's memory. On the third — the center and the highest . . . Smith's breath caught in his throat suddenly. Here then, on the great throne before them, lay all that was left of a god —the greatest of antiquity's deities. This mound of gray dust. The oldest thing upon three worlds—older than the mountains that held it, older than the very old beginnings of the mighty race of man. Great Pharol—dust upon a throne.

"Say, listen," broke in Yarol's matter-of-fact voice. "Why did the image turn to dust when the room and the throne didn't? The whole room must have come from that crystal temple on the other world. You'd think——"

"The image must have been very old long before the temple was built," said Smith softly. He was thinking how dead it looked, lying there in a soft gray mound on the crystal. How dead! how immeasurably old!—yet if the little man spoke truly, life still dwelt in these ashes of forgotten deity. Could he indeed forge from the gray dust a cable that would reach out irresistibly across the gulfs of time and space, into dimensions beyond man's understanding, and draw back the vanished entity which had once been Great Pharol? Could he? And if he could—suddenly doubt rose up in Smith's mind. What man, with a god to do his bidding, would stop short of domination over the worlds of space—perhaps of godhood for himself? And if that man were half mad? . . .

He followed Yarol across the shining floor in silence. It took them longer to reach the throne than they had expected—there was something deceptive about the crystal of that room, and the clarity of the brimming golden light. The translucent heights of the triumvirate structure that had enthroned gods towered high over their heads. Smith looked upward toward that central pedestal bearing its eon-old burden, wondering what men had stood here before him at the foot of the throne, what men of nameless races and forgotten worlds, worshipping the black divinity that was Pharol. On this crystal floor the feet of——

A scrambling sound interrupted his wondering. The irreverent Yarol, his eyes on the gray dust above them, was climbing the crystal throne. It was slippery, and never meant for mounting, and his heavy boots slid over the smoothness of it. Smith stood watching with a half-smile. For long ages no living man had dared approach this place save in reverence, on his knees, not venturing so much as to lift his eyes to that holy of holies where sat incarnate godhood. Now—Yarol's foot slipped on the last step of the ascent and he muttered under his breath, reaching out to clutch the pedestal where Great Pharol, first of the living gods, had ruled a mightier world than any men inhabit now.

At the summit he paused, looking down from an eminence whence no eyes save those of gods had ever looked before. And he frowned in a puzzled way as he looked.

"Something wrong here, N. W.," he said. "Look up. What's going on around the ceiling?"

Smith's pale gaze rose. For a moment he stared in utter bewilderment. For the third time that day his eyes were beholding something so impossible that they refused to register the fact upon an outraged brain. Something dark and yet not dark was closing down upon them. The

roof seemed to lower—and panic stirred within him briefly. The ceiling, coming down to crush them? Some further guardian of the gods descending like a blanket over their heads? What?

And then understanding broke upon him, and his laugh of sheer relief echoed almost blasphemously in the silence of the place.

"The light's running out," he said. "Like water, just draining away. That's all."

And the incredible thing was true. That shining lake of light which brimmed the crystal hollow was ebbing, pouring through the door, down the passage, out into the upper air, and darkness, literally, was flowing in behind it. And it was flowing fast.

"Well," said Yarol, casting an imperturbable glance upward, "we'd better be moving before it all runs out. Hand me up the box, will you?"

Hesitantly Smith unslung the little lacquered steel box they had been given. Suppose the man could forge that chain to enslave a god? Suppose they brought him back the dust to weld it from—what then? Such limitless power even in the hands of an eminently wise, eminently sane and balanced man would surely be dangerous. And in the hands of the little whispering fanatic——

Yarol, looking down from his height, met the troubled eyes and was silent for a moment. Then he whistled softly and said, though Smith had not spoken,

"I never thought of that. . . . D'you suppose it really could be done? Why, the man's half crazy!"

"I don't know," said Smith. "Maybe he couldn't—but he told us the way here, didn't he? He knew this much—I don't think we'd better risk his not knowing any more. And suppose he did succeed, Yarol—suppose he found some way to bring this—this monster of the dark—through into our dimension—turned it loose on our worlds. Do you think he could hold it? He talked about enslaving a god, but could he? I haven't much doubt that he knows some way of opening a door between dimensions to admit the thing that used to be Pharol—it can be done. It has been done. But once he gets it opened, can he close it? Could he keep the thing under control? You know he couldn't! You know it'd break loose, and —well, anything could happen then."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Yarol again. "Gods! Suppose——"

He broke off, staring in fascination at the gray dust that held such terrible potentialities. And there was silence for a while in the crystal place.

SMITH, looking upward at the throne and his friend, saw that the dark was flowing in faster and faster. And the light thinned about them, and long streaks of brilliance wavered out behind him as the light ebbed by in a mill-race torrent.

"Suppose we don't take it back, then," said Yarol suddenly. "Say we couldn't find the place—or that it was buried under debris or something. Suppose we —gods, but it's getting dark in here!"

The line of light was far down the walls now. Above them the black night of the underground brimmed in relentlessly. They watched in half-incredulous wonder as the tide-mark of radiance ebbed down and down along the crystal. Now it touched the level of the throne, and Yarol gasped as he was plunged head and shoulders into blackness, staring down as into a sea of light in which his own lower limbs moved shimmeringly, sending long ripples outward as they stirred.

Very swiftly the tide-race ran. Fascinated, they watched it ebb away, down

Yarol's legs, down beyond him entirely, so that he perched in darkness above the outrunning tide, down the heights of the throne, down to touch Smith's tall head with blackness. Uncannily he stood in the midst of a receding sea, shoulder-deep —waist-deep—knee-deep. . . .

The light that so short a time before—for so many countless ages before—had brimmed this chamber lay in a shallow, gleaming sea ankle-deep on the floor. For the first time in eons the throne of the Three stood in darkness.

Not until the last dregs of illumination were snaking along a black floor in rivulets that ran swiftly, like fiery snakes, toward the door, did the two men awake from their wonder. The last of the radiance that must have been lighted on a lost world millions of years ago, perhaps by the hands of the first gods—ebbed doorward. Smith drew a deep breath and turned in the blackness toward the spot where the throne must be standing in the first dark it had known for countless ages. Those snakes of light along the floor did not seem to give out any radiance—the place was blacker than any night above ground. Yarol's light-tube suddenly stabbed downward, and Yarol's voice said from the dark,

"Whew! Should have bottled some of that to take home. Well, what d'you say, N. W.? Do we leave with the dust or without it?"

"Without it," said Smith slowly. "I'm sure of that much, anyhow. But we can't leave it here. The man would simply send others, you know. With blasting material, maybe, if we said the place was buried. But he'd get it."

Yarol's beam shifted, a white blade in the dark, to the gray, enigmatic mound beside him. In the glare of the Tomlinson-tube it lay inscrutably, just as it had lain for all the eons since the god forsook it—waiting, perhaps, for this moment. And Yarol drew his gun.

"Don't know what that image was made of," he said, "but rock or metal or anything else will melt into nothing in the full-power heat of a gun."

And in a listening silence he flicked the catch. Blue-white and singing, the flame leaped irresistibly from its muzzle—struck full in an intolerable violence of heat upon that gray mound which had been a god. Rocks would have melted under the blast. Rocket-tube steel would have glowed molten. Nothing that the hands of man can fashion could have resisted the mighty heat-blast of a ray-gun at full strength. But in its full blue glare the mound of dust lay motionless.

Above the hissing of the flame Smith heard Yarol's muttered *"Shar!"* of amazement. The gun muzzle thrust closer into the gray heap, until the crystal began to glow in the reflected heat and blue sparks spattered through the darkness. And very slowly the edges of the mound began to turn red and sullen. The redness spread. A little blue flame licked up; another.

YAROL flipped off the gun-catch and sat watching as the dust began to blaze. Presently, as the brilliance of it grew stronger, he slid down from his pedestal and made his precarious way along the slippery crystal to the floor. Smith scarcely realized that he had come. His eyes were riveted on the clear, burning flame that was once a god. It burned with a fierce, pale light flickering with nameless, evanescent colors—the dust that had been Pharol of the utter darkness burning slowly away in a flame of utter light.

And as the minutes passed and the flame grew stronger, the reflections of it began to dance eerily in the crystal walls and ceiling, sending long wavers down-

ward until the floor was carpeted with dazzles of flame. An odor of unnamable things very faintly spread upon the air—smoke of dead gods. . . . It went to Smith's head dizzily, and the reflections wavered and ran together until he seemed to be suspended in space while all about him pictures of flame went writhing through the dark—pictures of flame—nebulous, unreal pictures wavering across the walls and vanishing—flashing by uncertainly overhead, running under his feet, circling him round from wall to wall in reeling patterns, as if reflections made eons ago on another world and buried deep in the crystal were waking to life at the magic touch of the burning god.

With the smoke eddying dizzily in his nostrils he watched—and all about him, overhead, underfoot, the strange, wild pictures ran blurrily through the crystal and vanished. He thought he saw mighty landscapes ringed by such mountains as none of today's worlds know . . . he thought he saw a whiter sun than has shone for eons, lighting a land where rivers thundered between green banks . . . thought he saw many moons parading across a purple night wherein shone constellations that haunted him with familiarity in the midst of their strangeness . . . saw a green star where red Mars should be, and a far pin-prick of white where the green point that is Earth hangs. Cities reeled past across the crystal darkness in shapes stranger than any that history records. Peaks and spires and angled domes towered high and shining under the hot white sun—strange ships riding the airways. . . . He saw battles—weapons that have no names today blasting the eery towers into ruins, wiping great smears of blood across the crystal—saw triumphal marches where creatures that might have been the forerunners of men paraded in a blaze of color through shining streets . . . strange, sinuous creatures, half seen, that were men, yet not men. . . . Nebulously the history of a dead and forgotten world flared by him in the dark.

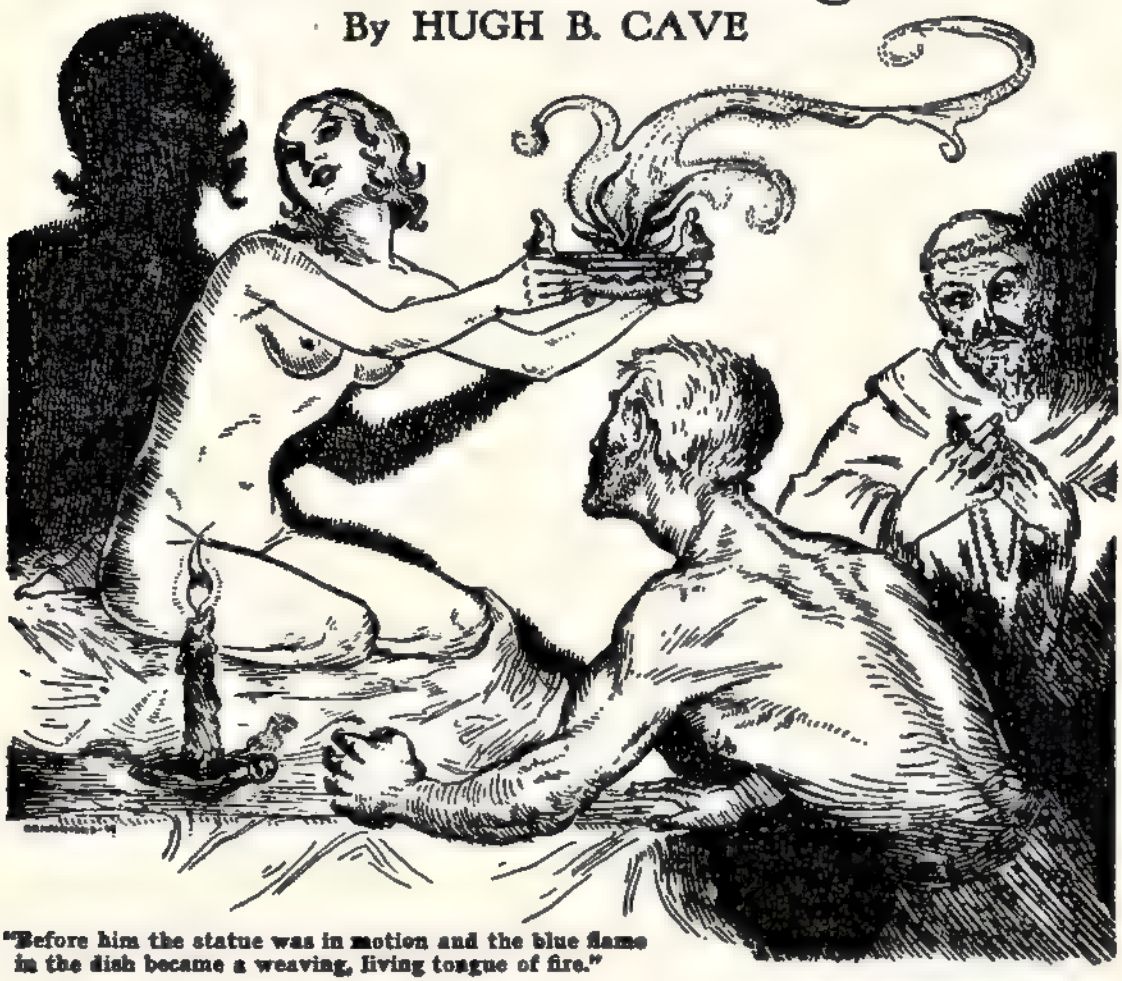
He saw the man-things in their great shining cities bowing down before a—something—of darkness that spread monstrously across the white-lit heavens . . . saw the beginnings of Great Pharol . . . saw the crystal throne in a room of crystal where the sinuous, man-formed beings lay face down in worshipping windrows about a great triple pedestal toward which, for the dazzle and the darkness of it, he could not turn his eyes. And then without warning, in a mighty blast of violence, all the wild pictures in the flickering flame-light ran together and shivered before his dizzied eyes, and a great burst of blinding light leaped across the walls until the whole great chamber once more for an instant blazed with radiance—but a radiance so searing that it did not illuminate but stunned, blinded, exploded in the very brains of the two men who watched. . . .

In the flash of an instant before oblivion overtook him, Smith knew they had looked upon the death of a world. Then, with blinded eyes and reeling brain, he stumbled and sank into darkness.

BLACKNESS was all about them when they opened their eyes again. The fire on the throne had burnt away into eternal darkness. Stumblingly they followed the white guidance of their tube-lights down the long passage and out into the upper air. The pale Martian day was darkening over the mountains.

The Isle of Dark Magic

By HUGH B. CAVE



"Before him the statue was in motion and the blue flame in the dish became a weaving, living tongue of fire."

An utterly different story is this—about a corpse-woman, and a man who hid himself away from the world

CAPTAIN BRUK, master of the *Bella Gale,* was the man who brought Peter Mace to Faikana; and since I did not meet the boy until his arrival, I must tell the first part of this tale as it was seen through Captain Bruk's eyes. So, then, I must go back a little.

Bruk was "on the beach," as the saying is, when the Jornsen Trading Company, in Papeete, offered him the *Bella Gale.* The Jornsen Company, like most of Papeete's smaller concerns, operated a fleet of second-rate tramps which were schooner-rigged and sailed under their own spread. No captain of repute would have accepted command of even the best of them. But Bruk was desperate.

His orders were to touch Faaite, sail north to Fakarava and Taou, and wind up at Rarioa, bartering for as much copra as the schooner would hold. He was to be back in Papeete inside the month, if

possible. And he was to carry one passenger, a white man, as far as Rarioa.

The white man was Peter Mace, and, given his choice, Bruk would have picked more promising company or none at all. Peter Mace was a thin, worried-looking youth possessed of a pair of eyes which missed nothing. He could not have been more than twenty-five, and he had been in Papeete, so he said, only three weeks.

He came aboard an hour before the schooner sailed, and he brought with him a large wooden packing-case which he insisted on storing in his own cabin. And for two days he kept entirely to himself, offering not a word of explanation to any one.

Later, however, he found time and the desire to ask questions. Before the *Belle Gale* reached Faaite, he had demanded the name of every atoll in Paumotu. He had questioned Bruk concerning the habits of the islanders, how they treated white men, what atolls were the least populated, and whether Bruk knew any small motu off the schooner routes where a man might be entirely alone. A thousand things he insisted on knowing, but not one word did he speak of himself or of his work or of his reason for going to Raroia. And not once did he mention the meaning of the packing-case in his cabin..

Then one day, out of a clear sky, he said:

"If I give you five hundred dollars, Captain, will you go out of your way to put me ashore at Faikana?"

"Five hundred dollars!" Bruk echoed.

"Is that too little?"

"In the name of all that's holy," Bruk demanded, "what do you want with Faikana? If I put you down there, you'll wait half your life for a tub to take you off!"

"If five hundred dollars is too little," Peter Mace smiled, "we'll double it."

And that was all Bruk got out of him. Five hundred dollars, doubled, and Faikana. Faikana, the end of all creation, a forgotten island inhabited by a mere handful of Marquesan natives and a missionary with queer ideas!

So Peter Mace came to Faikana. And I, Father Jason, the "missionary with queer ideas," met him for the first time and wondered about that strange wooden packing-case which he brought with him.

WITHIN a week, the boy had established himself. He first found an abandoned native shack and moved into it, taking his belongings with him. Then, with a methodical lack of haste which brought amazing results, he obtained native assistance and began building for himself a permanent residence, more than three miles from the little settlement of which my house was the center. Apparently he preferred to be alone with whatever business had brought him to our island. Yet he came several times to visit me, and politely invited me to spend the first evening with him in his new home, when it was completed.

This I did, and was mildly surprized. Though I had heard whispers from the natives, I had discreetly remained away from the scene of the boy's operations until implicitly invited there by him. I found the house to be practically isolated in a natural clearing in the midst of that belt of desolation which covers the northernmost tip of Faikana. Its only means of communication with the village was a narrow, perilous trail through dense jungle, which entailed more than an hour of the hardest kind of walking. Surely Peter Mace had no desire for casual visitors!

The house itself, however, was com-

plete in every detail—an elaborate two-roomed native dwelling with an additional small chamber upstairs. We sat there that evening, he and I, sipping native brandy and playing chess. Our conversation never once touched on personalities. Neither he nor I asked questions, nor did he offer to show me what lay in the upstairs room. When the time came for me to go, he wished me a pleasant good-night and instructed his newly acquired native boy, Menegai, to accompany me back to the village. And for two weeks, that was all I saw of him!

But native curiosity, you know, is a thing easily aroused; and I heard many strange stories during those two weeks. "Peteme," the Marquesans called the boy, and Peteme, so they said, was a devil incarnate. During the daytime they heard him working in the upstairs room of his house, and when he was not working he was striding about like a caged animal, muttering and grumbling to himself. Several times, when they had crept close to the downstairs window and peered in, they had seen him sitting at the table, hunched over a pile of books, with whisky bottles stacked in front of him. He was drunk, they said. His eyes were distended and bloodshot, and his hands shook as they held the books. But what he had in that upstairs chamber they did not know, for it was impossible to peer in the window and find out.

All these stories I knew to be greatly exaggerated, because my people were superstitious children at best. But I knew, too, that there must be some truth in them, for natives are not deliberate liars unless they can, by lying, gain material things for themselves. And so, thinking to invite the boy to my home and there talk to him about himself, I went one afternoon to his house.

He was not there when I arrived. I knocked, and received no answer, and, on opening the door, found no one within. It was strange, I thought, that he should go away and leave the door open, for I saw that he had fitted it with a patent lock. I called his name aloud, and then, bewildered, looked about me.

The table was piled high with books, and with cardboard-covered manuscripts. Curiously I looked at these, and then intently I studied them. I shuddered, then, and felt suddenly as if I were in an unhallowed place. If a fire had been burning, I should have thrown those books into it, despite the boy's certain anger on discovering my act. For the books were forbidden books, each and every one of them; and I say forbidden, not because I come of a religious calling, but because such volumes have been condemned by truth and science alike. One of them was the *Black Cults* of Von Heller. Another, in manuscript form, inscribed in Latin, was the unexpurgated edition of what is now *The Veil Unseen.* A third I believed to be—and I now know that my belief was correct—the missing portion of that perilous treatise, *Le Culte des Morts,* of whose missing portion only four copies are reputed to exist! Merciful God, these were no books for the soul of a twenty-five-year-old boy who lived alone with his thoughts!

Utterly confounded, I turned from the table and sat for some time in a chair near the open door, waiting impatiently for Peter Mace to return. When he did not come, I rose and paced the floor, and suddenly recalled what the natives had whispered about the room above me. Was it possible, I thought, that the books on the table beside me had some connection with the contents of the chamber above? Could it be that Peter Mace had gone deeper into these matters than the mere study of them?

I hesitated. This was not my home; I had no right to climb the narrow ladder which hung so invitingly in the shadowed corner of the room where I stood. Yet I had a right, as a religious adviser, to know what sins the boy was guilty of, so that I might instruct him accordingly. Deliberately, therefore, I strode across the floor.

THE ladder was a flimsy one, solid enough, perhaps, to bear the weight of the boy's lean body, but not so solid that I felt comfortable in ascending it. I groped upward slowly and cautiously, testing each rung before trusting my weight upon it. Then I reached above me and pushed aside the atap mat which covered the aperture in the ceiling; and with a sigh of relief I thrust my arms through the hole. And then two things happened. Behind and below me, the door of the house clattered back against the wall, as Peter Mace came over the threshold. And before me, on a level with my eyes, I saw a thing sitting Buddha-fashion on the floor of that upstairs room.

I saw the thing only for an instant, before the boy's drunken hands clawed at my legs and dragged me down. I saw it, too, in semi-darkness, which accounts for the mistake of my first impression — which impression I carried with me for weeks afterward, believing it to be truth. For the thing I saw was a woman, naked and staring at me. A young and lovely girl, sitting utterly without motion on a pedestal made of boards covered with cloth. Beside her stood the packing-case in which she had been transported to Faikana. In her hands, extended toward me, was a large metal bowl in which some chemical, or combination of chemicals, burned with an odor as sweet as the smell of ether.

That was all I saw. The rung of the ladder broke under me as Peter Mace hurled himself upon me. I fell sideways against the wall. The fall stunned me. The next thing I knew, Peter Mace was standing wide-legged before me, and my back was against the table, and my hands were rigidly outflung to keep the boy's contorted face from thrusting itself into mine.

At that moment Peter Mace did not know me. He was insane with rage. His face was drained of all color, and the veins on his forehead protruded like ancient scars. Animal hate was in his eyes. Guttural words, uncouth and terrible, snarled from his lips. He would have battered me to unconsciousness, perhaps to death, if I had not stumbled backward and groped my way to the door.

Then I ran, knowing better than to remain and try to reason with a man so fiendishly angry. I had no desire to fight him; nor could I, at that time, explain the reason for my investigation of that forbidden room. I ran, as fast as my legs would take me; and when I looked back, after plowing blindly through the deep cogon grass to the edge of the small clearing, I saw him standing rigid in the doorway of the house, his hands clutching the door-frame and his legs spread wide beneath him.

And with that picture engraved in my mind, I turned and plunged down the trail to the village.

THAT was the beginning of what I may rightly call a reign of terror—not for me, but for the natives. From that day on they were not safe in going near Peter Mace's house, and yet, despite the danger, their curiosity continued to take them there. More than one tale reached me of the boy's insane fury—of how, on discovering some luckless native inside the forbidden boundary, he had

rushed out like a man gone mad, pursuing the native even into the jungle. True, these tales reached me after many recountings, and were certainly magnified for my benefit; but they were nevertheless significant. I did not go again to Peter Mace's domain.

And then one day he came to me! Alone he came, in the heat of noonday, bare-headed and bare-footed. Gazing at him, no man could ever have guessed that this dishevelled degenerate had been, less than three weeks ago, a young and well-to-do adventurer. He faced me unsteadily. His eyes were black-rimmed, blood-streaked. His breath was foul with liquor fumes. And yet he came triumphantly. He glared at me! His wet lips, set in a facial mask which had not felt the touch of a razor for days, curled upward at the corners and grinned at me viciously.

"Well," he sneered, "are you still curious?"

I stood on the veranda of my house and stared at him, half afraid of him and half pitying him. But he wanted no pity. His filthy hands gripped the railing, and his bare feet were planted firmly on the steps. He returned my stare.

"Well, can't you speak?" he said. "Am I so drunk I can't be spoken to?"

"You are," I answered coldly. "You're too drunk to know what you're doing."

"That's what you think," he said, thrusting his face forward. "But I'm not doing anything, see? It's done. If you want to satisfy your damned curiosity, you can come back with me and *satisfy* it! And don't worry; I won't kick you out this time. I won't need to!"

Why I went with him, after such an outburst, I am not sure. Curiosity? Certainly, to a limited extent. But it was more than that. The boy was ill. He was mentally ill, morally ill. He needed help. It was my duty to go with him.

And I went. Assailed by doubts and by no little physical fear, I followed him into the jungle. Had he wished to murder me in safety and secrecy, he could have done so easily, in that labyrinth of gloom. The trail underfoot was slimy and uncertain after a night's rain. Not once did the sun beat down upon us through the ceiling of interlaced branches and drooling aroidinæ which hung above us at every step. On all sides the eternal drip, drip, drip of moisture accompanied our slow progress. No word passed between us.

He could have murdered me, I say; but he did nothing but trudge along like an automaton, slopping through pools of black mud and staring straight ahead of him. The physical effort of that unpleasant journey was doing something to him. When we reached the clearing where his house stood, he turned to look at me with bewildered eyes, as if he had forgotten why I had accompanied him. And, in truth, he had forgotten!

"What do you want?" he demanded sullenly.

I hesitated. I tried desperately to read what lay behind his challenging stare. I told myself that his bewilderment was genuine; that the knowledge of what he had done while in the grip of liquor and near-madness had, in reality, gone from him. So I said, very quietly, as we stood there on the steps of his house:

"You asked me to help you."

"Help me?" he frowned. "How?"

"You had something to tell me, to show me. Some trouble that was hurting you. You came to me because it is my duty to hear other men's troubles and show them, if I can, a way out."

For quite some time he studied me, as if he were studying some printed puzzle in a book and wondering if the given solution were the correct one. He raised

one hand to push the mop of hair out of his eyes, and then he chewed on the knuckles of that hand, gazing at me all the while like a small child trying very hard to recall certain things which had been forgotten. Finally he smiled and led the way into the house.

From that moment on, he was not the same. He turned to Menegai, his houseboy, who was standing near us, and told the native to go away and leave us alone. Then he motioned me silently to a chair, and drew up another chair facing me. He leaned forward, peered steadily at me, and finally said:

"Do you know who I am, Father?"

"Truthfully," I replied, "I do not."

"No, no, I don't mean that. Peter Mace is my real name. I mean, do you know *who* I am? *What* I am?"

"I should like to," I told him. "Then I might be able to help you."

"Yes, you might. But I'm not religious, Father. I don't believe in a God, that way. I know too much that is different."

"Tell me," I suggested softly.

And he told me.

His name was Peter Mace. Had I ever heard that name? Did I know what it meant in New York, Philadelphia? No? Well, names did not mean much in the South Seas, anyway—and he smiled wearily as he said that. What did it matter? *His* part of the name was unimportant, after all. He had been only a student at a well-known New York medical school—an honor student, until his fourth year, when he had been expelled in disgrace for certain lectures and experiments which were better left undescribed.

There had been a girl. A lovely girl, but a creature of the streets. Mureen Kennedy was her name. She had loved him.

"She was clean, pure," he told me. "We loved each other the way your God meant a boy and a girl to love. Nothing else in the world was worth thinking about. And—your God took her from me."

He, Peter Mace, had been living a life of secrecy at the time, reluctant to face his family after being expelled from the university. He had cast his lot with a likable young fellow who kept small and unpretentious rooms in the Village. This fellow, Jean Lanier, studied art. No! Created art!

"They laughed at him, Father, just as they laughed at everything beyond their understanding."

But *she* had died. Death had stalked those shadowed rooms, leering and screaming in derision, until——

"I went mad, Father. Sometimes I am still mad, when I think of it, of her. There she lay, in my arms, *dead*. A woman of the streets, they said. An unclean woman. But she was not! She was beautiful! For two days I sat beside her dead body, caressing her, staring at her, until my eyes could cry no more and I had no voice left for sobbing. All that while Jean Lanier kept silence, bringing me food and drink, respecting my anguish, never once condemning me. And then, in my madness, I conceived the idea of keeping her with me for ever!"

For ever? Peter Mace must have seen the horror that came into my eyes as I stared at him. He smiled and leaned forward to place his hand gently on my arm.

"Not that way, Father," he said, shaking his head. "You misunderstand. Jean Lanier, he was an artist, a sculptor. We stole money, he and I, and for a week he worked day and night, without sleeping, to make for me what I wanted. When it was finished, we covered her poor dead body and took it far from the

city, where every single thing was quiet and peaceful. There, at night, we buried her. No one missed her; no one asked questions. She was only a woman of the streets; and who cares when a woman of the streets disappears?"

He stared at me, and at the floor, and for a long time he did not speak again. Then he said heavily:

"I should never have done it, Father. I should never have made Jean Lanier do what he did. It drove me insane. It filled my mind with hate for Almighty God. And because I had studied these" —he pointed bitterly to the pile of forbidden books on the table beside us— "there was only one way for me to turn. I studied more and more. I *learned* things. Jean Lanier turned me out and would have no more of me. Wherever I went, with the thing Jean had made for me, people whispered and called me mad."

"And so," I said, "you came here to Faikana."

He nodded. "That, too, was part of the madness," he confessed. "It was no separate insanity in itself; it was a part of the whole. I had to get away from every living person. I had to be alone, with her. Do you understand?—I had to be alone with *her!* I had to finish what I had started! And I have! *I have!*"

All at once he was on his feet before me, laughing shrilly. I shrank from him, realizing the horror of the transformation that had taken place in him. I knew, then, the condition of his mind. When he had come for me, at my house, his mind had been full of this strange triumph which was burning within him, and he had been at least partly mad. Then, on that long, silent journey through the jungle, the fires within him had burned low; he had even forgotten the cause of his madness. And now he had slowly, terribly, talked himself into being once more a savage beast with but one idea. Certainly it was no sane man that I cringed from.

"I'll show her to you!" he bellowed, beating the air in front of my face with his clenched fists. "You sneaked upstairs once, damn you, and all you saw was a chunk of dead marble! Come up with me, *now!* I'll show you something your religion-stuffed brain won't dare believe!"

He gripped my arms and hauled me out of my chair. His wide eyes were close to my face, finding fiendish satisfaction in every expression that twisted my features. He shook me as a grown man shakes a terrified child.

"You think your idiotic religion is the answer to everything in life; don't you?" he flung out. "You think you know all there is to know! Well, I'll show you! I'll teach you something!"

He pushed me past the table, where those obscene volumes were piled. Savagely he held my arm and forced me toward the ladder which led to that shadowed chamber above. Had I been able to get past him, to reach the door, I should have fled from that place without hesitation, just as I have fled once before. But escape was not possible. He would have followed me—I am sure of it—and dragged me back. God alone knows what might have happened then.

The ladder swayed perilously as I climbed it. I had no time to ascend cautiously. Had I paused, he might have thrust me forcibly up those slender rungs, precipitating both of us to the floor below. Strange that I should have feared physical harm, when I should have been dreading a thousand times more intently the probable mental horror into which I was stumbling! But I did not see that horror at first, even after clambering through the

aperture in the ceiling and groping to my feet on the floor of the room beyond. That room was a domain of shadow, and the sudden flare of a match in Peter Mace's uplifted hand did not at first reveal the thing that faced me.

Then I saw, and stepped backward with such violence that my rigid body was lashed by the nipa uprights in the wall behind me. Peter Mace had paced forward to a small table and ignited a candle which sat there; and the candle—a crude, home-made thing which burned with ghastly brilliance—sputtered and hissed as it flooded the chamber with illumination.

That room was a garret, small and bare and uninviting. Standing erect in it, a man of ordinary height could have reached up, without effort, and touched the ceiling. Walls and floor were of the crudest construction, fashioned of huhu wood and overlaid with coarsely woven atap mats. Only one window was in evidence, and that masked by a strip of unclean cotton cloth. And there, against the far wall, staring straight at me, sat the thing which I had once before dared to look at. There, in the restless glare of the candle, the thing confronted me—and this time I saw every separate, single detail of it.

I have said before that the thing was a woman. It was. Now, as I advanced fearfully toward it, fascinated by the almost life-like manner in which it studied me, I could not repress amazement at the uncanny perfection of it. If Jean Lanier had made this, then Jean Lanier had been truly an artist! For the woman was a creature of marble, so delicately and expertly sculptured that every portion of her exquisite form could have been mistaken, even at close range, for living reality. Naked she was, and sitting in an attitude of meditation, with her extended hands holding the metal dish which I had seen before. And I knew intuitively, even as I wondered at the uncanny loveliness of her, that there was something terrible, something wrong, in the way she was sitting there.

"This," I said slowly to Peter Mace, "is the woman you loved? This is Maureen Kennedy?"

He laughed—not wildly or triumphantly, but so softly that I turned abruptly to peer at him, and found him smiling at me as a man smiles who knows more, much more, than his victim.

"She *will* be the woman I love, when I am finished," he replied; and he walked to the marble figure and put his hands on her shoulders, and looked down into her face as if she could understand him.

And then I made a mistake. I believed him to be less mad than when he had forced me up the ladder a moment ago. I put my hand on his arm and said quietly:

"My boy, this is not good. Your friend should never have made such an idol for you to worship. The commandment tells us: Thou shalt have none other God but me."

He flung my hand away. Savagely he whirled on me, glared at me. I thought his clenched fist would crash into my face. Then he stepped back, smiling. Deliberately he walked past me to the opening in the floor, and stooped, and dragged a heavy wooden square over the aperture, securing the square in place with thongs which were attached to it. With equal deliberation he paced to the opposite wall, grasped a chair which leaned there, and set the chair down in the center of the room. Standing behind it, he said evenly:

"Come here and sit down."

"I have no wish to remain in this room," I retorted.

"Come here and sit down."

"Why?"

"Because I say so! And if your idiotic God were here, he would sit beside you. If either of you refused, I would kill you both."

I hesitated, and he stood motionless, waiting. Slowly, then, I obeyed him, and my hands trembled on my knees as I lowered myself into the chair.

"Now you will sit here and watch," he ordered, "and you will say nothing. I have work to do. I must not be interrupted. And if your foolish God does not strike you down for looking at forbidden things, you will soon know why I asked Jean Lanier to make this woman for me!"

And now I must recount truths which were perhaps better left untold. Probably I shall be condemned severely for the words which I here set down. Perhaps I shall be more than condemned—and you, also, for reading them. But these things *must* be told, for the salvation of those who may some day be mad enough to walk in Peter Mace's footsteps!

There I sat, in a small chamber filled with leaping shadows. There, facing me, sat that marble image of a too-lovely woman. The exit was closed, the single window shut and masked. We were alone, Peter Mace, the woman, and I, in a room cursed with sinister thoughts and evil machinations. And, disregarding my presence entirely, the boy proceeded with his unhallowed labors.

He went first to a small compartment in the wall and took therefrom a number of bound volumes, one of which he carried to the table. Poring over this, and deliberately turning its pages, he found what he sought and began to read silently to himself. I saw his lips move with the words. I saw the terrible eagerness in his eyes as they stared unblinkingly at the page. Rigid and motionless he stood there, full in the candle's glare, his shoulders hunched forward, his head downthrust, his hands clenched white on the table-top. Then he straightened, turned slowly, and walked toward the woman.

From a soft leather pouch which lay there at the woman's feet, he took something small and black and touched it to the woman's marble lips. I thought at first that it was a crucifix; then I saw my error and shuddered, for it was an *inverted* crucifix and the face upon it was the face of a leering demon. Carefully he placed it in the metal dish which the woman's lifeless hands extended toward him. With the same deliberate care he took a small phial in his hands, and poured into the dish a viscous dark liquid which gleamed dully in the dim light. Then I saw a match blaze brightly, and the dish was suddenly alive with pale blue flame.

Slowly, then, the boy sank to his knees. He did not turn to look at me. I doubt if he even realized my presence. He knelt, and stared into the woman's face, and raised his arms in supplication. From his lips came an almost inaudible low monotone, as if he were praying.

In truth, I thought he was praying, and my heart was filled with pity for him. I respected his torment; I understood his loneliness. Then I heard the *words* he was muttering—I knew them for what they were—and it was I who prayed to a merciful God to forgive us both!

You have heard of the Black Mass? You are aware of its hideous significance? Then you know the extent of the madness in Peter Mace's soul, and you know to whom he was muttering his maledictions.

But it was more than that. Dimly I realized the enormity of his intent, and slowly but surely, as I listened, I became prey to utter terror. A thousand times

since that day I have reviled myself for not finding courage enough to stop him. Had I leaped out of my chair and flung myself upon him, he might have thanked me for it later. Even had I been forced to seize the very chair in which I sat, and strike him with it, I could not have been condemned for such violence. For the boy was mad. He was inviting annihilation.

Yet I sat there, staring at him. I sat rigid, eyes wide and blood pounding in my temples. I was terrified and fascinated, and, God help me, I let him have his way.

Those words, I can hear them yet, whenever I sit alone in a shadowed room. They mutter at me in the same singsong chant. They are in my brain:

"This is the night, O Bethmoora. This is the night, though it be day and the sun be shining without our sanctuary. Hear me, while I walk by the black lake of Hali, O Nyarlathotep. Hear me what I say . . . word for word . . . as the earth-born must say to command the presence of the Black King. Hear me . . . heaven in art . . . heaven in art . . . and the Yellow Sign is burning on the altar of my desire, that She may open her eyes and be mine again. Who father our name, thy be hallowed! Words for you, O Yuggoth, O Yian, O Hastur, O Prince of Evil! Give her to me, I say, and command your price. And in the name of the Great One who must not be named . . . through the wells of night where the crawling ones lurk unseen, waiting for wings to raise them . . . and in the name of the headless ones born in the red foulness of the limitless pit . . . give her to me in life, O Hastur. Give her to my arms, O Yuggoth! Hear me, O Lord of Lords, Nyarlathotep!"

These words, born of madmen's minds and filled with hideous suggestions of horrors forbidden to men, tumbled from the lips of the boy who knelt in that vile room with me! These words and more; but the others I did not hear, for I had become like a man impaled, sitting as straight and stiff as a marble statue. No, no—not as a marble statue! *That* statue was no longer straight and stiff! Into the chamber with us had come darkness—a living, evil darkness which threatened to smother the ocher glare of the candle. And before me the pale statue of the woman was in motion, swaying slowly, awfully, from side to side, while its outstretched hands carried the metal dish to and fro like a pendulum and the blue flame in that dish became a weaving, living tongue of fire.

Peter Mace had stopped muttering. *Other* voices had become audible, low and vibrant and speaking words which had no beginning or end. As if uttered through long, deep tubes, those syllables droned into being. As if moaned aloud by some dark-robed priest of an uncouth cult, they singsonged into every niche of that foul room.

We were no longer alone. The darkness all about us was peopled with shadows, with nameless things which had no shape, no form, no substance, and yet were there! It was a time for prayer and supplication; yet I knew no prayer mighty enough to afford protection. We had forfeited the right to pray! Peter Mace, with his evil machinations, had summoned elements from the deeper pits of darkness. His blasphemies had established communion with entities more powerful than any who might listen to prayers from human lips. And it is I, Father Jason, a missionary, who say that!

I WENT to my knees with my hands uplifted before me. But no words came from my lips. I spoke them, but they

died unborn. On all sides of me that hell-dark was in motion, those hell-shapes were gathering closer. Before me the boy had risen unsteadily to his feet and stood like a man drunk, as if stunned by the enormity of his sin. But what I saw most of all, and what I remembered with awful clarity for nights afterward, was the transformation which was taking place in the marble woman!

God help me for ever looking into that face! The eyes, which had been open only to natural dimensions, had widened in agony. The lips were shapeless, the face a gray-white mask twisted beyond recognition. Every inch of the woman's body was in motion, struggling hideously, pitifully, to be free of its marble bonds. She was no longer dead! She was no longer a thing of stone! Life had been poured into her rigid body. And she was fighting now, in a hell of physical torment, to assimilate that cursed power and become *all* alive!

You have seen a victim of epilepsy suddenly seized by that dread disease? This woman was like that. She strove to rise. She fought to free her hands from the metal dish to which they clung, so that she might embrace the boy who stood before her. Slowly, horribly, with a paroxysmal jerking of her hips and breasts, she turned toward him. In agony she stared into his face, begging his assistance. She was trying to speak, but could not!

And the boy returned her stare. He had become like a man standing erect in sleep. He seemed not to realize her agony, or to be aware of the hideous darkness which hung all about him like a winding-sheet. Slowly, mechanically, as if obeying orders over which he had no command, he advanced toward her. Mutely he peered into her face. Then I heard him say quietly, evenly, as if he were reciting the words:

"It is not yet. No, it is not yet. This is the fifth time, O Hastur. Only the fifth time, O Lord of Lords. Each time the agony is greater and the life is stronger. You have promised that on the seventh time the agony will destroy the death and the life will be complete. I am patient. I am content to wait. All things come to him who waits."

Deliberately he extended his arms. His hands came together and pressed downward upon the metal dish. I saw his eyes close and his lips whiten as the blue flame ate into his palms. But no sound came from him as he stood there; and in a moment, when he stepped back, the blue fire was a living thing no longer. Then, as if performing a ritual, the boy sank slowly to his knees and placed his hands upon the body of the living-dead woman before him. The agony went out of her face; her struggles ceased. She became as before, a creature of stone, inanimate and lifeless. He—he knelt with bowed head at the feet of his shrine. Knelt and prayed, not to the God of men, but to the obscene gods who possessed his soul. While he knelt there in supplication, the room emptied itself of shadow and sound, and he and I and the woman were alone together, as we had been. And I, knowing only that my heart was black with horror and my eyes blinded by the forbidden things they had looked upon, crept quietly to the aperture in the floor, and drew aside the square of wood which covered it, and lowered myself slowly, cautiously, down the ladder to the room below.

No sound was audible in that chamber of mystery above me as I paced noiselessly to the door. No sound accompanied my escape from Peter Mace's house. When I reached the rim of the jungle, and looked back, I saw only a glow of yellow light behind the masked window

of that upstairs room; and I knew that Peter Mace was still there, still kneeling in prayer, while the crude candle on the table cast its innocent light over the chamber's unholy contents.

Slowly, and with my heart heavy within me, I went away.

FROM that day until the day of the final accounting, I did not see Peter Mace. In truth, I did not want to. Hours passed before the color crept back into my face and my hands stopped shaking. After reaching my home that night, sick and weary from tramping through the jungle, I closed and barred my door and sat like a dead man, staring at the floor. My mind was full of the monstrous things I had participated in. I dreaded the penalty. Worse—I knew that those horrors were not yet complete. Over and over in my brain rang the boy's words: "On the seventh time the agony will destroy the death and the life will be complete. I am patient. All things come to him who waits."

No, I did not return to Peter Mace's house in the jungle. I feared to. I feared *him,* and the denizens of darkness who inhabited that horror-house with him. And this time, when the natives came to me with stories of the boy's madness, I knew better than to condemn those stories as exaggerations.

Menegai came, finally. Wide-eyed and terrified he hammered on my door and begged to be admitted. It was the evening of the ninth day, and the sight of the Marquesan's face brought to the surface all the fears which had lain dormant within me. I opened the door to him, and closed it quickly, and then listened to the shrill words which chattered from his betel-stained mouth.

"I teienei!" he wailed. "God almighty!" And then, in his own tongue, he screamed and muttered and whispered his story, with such genuine fear in his eyes that I knew his words to be truth.

Less than an hour ago, he, Menegai, had been sitting on an atap mat on the floor of his master's house. Peteme (Peter Mace) had been studying books, as usual, with his elbows on the table and his head bent over the printed pages. Then, suddenly, without a word, Peteme had pushed back his chair, risen to his feet, and paced toward the ladder which led to the upstairs room.

Menegai had begun to be afraid, then. Always when his master retired to that secret attic, strange things happened. Peteme was never the same after returning from that chamber. He became *heva* —wrong in the head. He became like a man drunk with tuak, or like a man who had watched the *titii e te epo,* the dance of love, so long that his mind went mad with desire.

And this time was no exception. Soon, from the room overhead, came sounds without meaning. Voices muttered, and other voices chanted in unison. Louder and louder the sounds grew, until, after an eternity, they were climaxed in a woman's scream—a horrible scream, as if some poor girl were being torn apart while yet alive. And then had come Peteme's shrill voice, bellowing in triumph, shouting over and over:

"The seventh time draws near! The sixth ordeal is finished! Hear me, O Hastur! The sixth ordeal is finished!"

Menegai had crouched near the door, trembling and afraid. Never before had his master thundered in a voice so full of triumph. Never before had the woman in that dread room screamed in such agony. Never before had she screamed at all. How could she? He, Menegai, had seen her with his own eyes, one afternoon when he had dared to look into his

master's secret, forbidden chamber. She was a stone woman. *How could a stone woman scream?*

Terrified, Menegai had waited for his master to come down the ladder; and after a while Peteme had come, reeling and staggering and muttering to himself. Menegai had backed away from him and stared at him. Peteme had stood rigid, returning that stare with eyes full of red madness. Then, all at once, the white man had become like a devil crazed with *atae*—like a monster in the grip of *rea moeuru*, the drug which makes men commit murder. Snarling horribly, he had flung himself forward.

"Damn you!" he had roared. "You're like every one else on this blasted island! You think I'm mad! You came to spy on me, to laugh at me! By God, I'll show you what happens to curiosity-seekers! I'll show them all!"

Only by a miracle had Menegai escaped. The edge of the atap mat, curling under Peteme's feet, had caused the white man to stumble. Menegai had flung the door open and raced over the threshold, screaming. Peteme had lurched after him. But Menegai had reached the jungle first; and in the jungle the Marquesan had fled to hiding-places where the white man dared not follow.

And now Menegai was here in my house, begging protection, and in my heart I knew that before another twenty-four hours had passed, the whole hideous affair of Peter Mace and the stone woman would reach its awful conclusion. And I was right—but before the twenty-four hours were up, something else occurred.

I was standing on the veranda of my house, and it was morning again, and the sun was a crimson ball of blood ascending from the blue waters of the lagoon. Menegai, the Marquesan, had crept away to his hut in the village. I was alone.

At first the thing I saw was merely a gray speck on the far horizon, so small that it might have been no speck at all, but merely my imagination. I put both hands to my eyes and peered out from under them; but my eyes were blinded from staring into the red sun, and presently I could see nothing but a glare of crimson. Yet that speck was there, and I knew it for what it was—a ship.

Later I saw it again, and while I stood staring at it, Menegai came running up the path, pointing and gesticulating excitedly.

"A schooner, Tavana!" he cried. "A schooner come here!"

Yes, a schooner was coming. But why? What could any tramp trader want with Faikana? In four years only one ship had visited our secluded island, and that ship had brought Peter Mace. It had brought unhappiness and horror, a madman and a woman of stone. Could this one be bringing a similar cargo?

I said nothing in answer to Menegai's eager questions. In my heart I dreaded the coming of this new messenger from the outside. Menegai, peering up into my face, read my thoughts and ceased his chatter. Bewildered, he left me and hurried down to the beach. Long after he had gone, I stood staring, hoping against hope that the approaching vessel would somehow, at the last moment, change its course and depart again, leaving us to ourselves.

Two hours later the schooner dropped anchor outside the reef, close enough to shore so that we on the beach were able to discern its name. It was the *Bella Gale*—the same *Bella Gale* which had brought Peter Mace to Faikana. Even while we stared, a small boat swept through the reef's opening and came slowly toward us; and a moment later I

was peering into the bearded face of Captain Bruk and shaking the grimy hand which he thrust into mine. And I was wondering, even then, what terrible event or chain of events had happened to put that haunted, desperate glare in Captain Bruk's eyes.

I soon learned. Without preamble Bruk said bluntly: "I want to talk with you, Father. Alone."

Together we went to my house, and closed the door upon the inquisitive natives who gathered outside. There, with the table between us, Bruk told his story.

"I've got a woman on board, Father," he scowled. "Go on, tell me I'm crazy. I know it. Tell *her* she's crazy! Any woman fool enough to trust herself to a roach-infested scow like the *Bella Gale* ought to be put in an asylum. This one ought to be there anyway. She's queer."

He pulled a bottle from his pocket, offered it to me, and then drank from it. Choking, he rammed the cork back viciously and leaned forward, resting both elbows on the table.

"She was waiting in Papeete when I got back after marooning the boy here," he grumbled. "Harlan—that's the Papeete manager—brought her aboard soon as we dropped anchor. He introduced me and gave me a good looking-over to make sure I was sober; then he said: 'All right, Bruk. You're going back to Rarioa. This woman wants to find the young fellow you put ashore there.'

"Well, I took her. I had to. But, by heaven, she was an odd one. You'll see for yourself, when I go back after her. She dresses like a funeral; wears black every damned minute of the day, and a black veil to boot. What does she look like? Don't ask me! I've been on board the same rotten schooner with her for almost ten days, coming straight here from Papeete, and I don't know yet what kind of a face she has! She don't speak unless she has to, and then she don't say more than three words at a time, so help me! And she's queer. She's uncanny. I tell you——"

Bruk put his hand on my arm and leaned even farther over the table, speaking in a whisper as if he were afraid of being overheard. I looked into his eyes and saw fear in them. Real fear, which had been there a long time.

"It's about this Rarioa business, Father," he mumbled. "Harlan thought I took the boy there, and told me to take the woman there, too. He didn't know I marooned the boy on Faikana. I didn't tell him that. If I had, he'd have claimed the money the boy paid me; and I wanted that money for myself. So when I left Papeete this last time, I headed for Rarioa. That's what he told me, wasn't it? Take the woman to Rarioa. But we hadn't been out more than three days when she came to me and said: 'You're not taking me to Peter.' Just like that, Father! How in the name of all that's holy did *she* know where Peter was?"

I stared at him. Some of the fear in his eyes must have found its way into my eyes as well. He returned my stare triumphantly.

"She's not human, I tell you!" he blurted. "She's not human even to look at! She walks around like she was asleep. She talks in the same tone of voice all the time, like she was tired. By heaven, I won't have any more to do with her, Father! I brought her here, and I'm leaving her here! It's up to you, now. You know more about this kind of business than I do."

"You brought her here," I said slowly, "because you were afraid not to?"

"Afraid?" he bellowed. "I tell you, when she looked at me with those eyes of hers and said, 'You're not taking me to

Peter,' I knew better than to double-cross her! I *brought* her to Peter!"

That was all. Bruk heaved himself up and stood swaying, while he drank again from the bottle of whisky. He glared at me, then laughed drunkenly as he pulled open the door.

"You can have her," he said. "I'll put her ashore like I was told to. You're welcome to her."

Then he went out.

IT WAS with mingled feelings of fear and apprehension that I awaited his return. Somehow I could not bring myself to go down to the beach. I chose to remain behind the closed door of my house, alone with my thoughts, though I might better have taken myself out of that shadowed room, into sunshine and open air, where my mind would have created visions less morbid.

Who could she be, this woman? A sister, perhaps, of the boy who had established himself in that house of sin in the jungle? A relative, perhaps, of the dead sweetheart whom he had left behind him? I wondered; and wondering, found myself drawing mental pictures of her. Subconsciously, Bruk's descriptions influenced those pictures. The woman of my imagination was a black-robed nun, uncouth and ungainly, eccentric of speech and action, not at all like the woman who confronted me less than ten minutes later.

Bruk's throaty hullo startled me out of my revery, and I drew the door open with a nervous jerk. And there she was—tall and graceful and utterly lovely, in direct contrast to my mental image of her. Quietly she followed him up the steps. Without embarrassment she stood facing me, while Bruk said curtly:

"This is Father Jason, ma'am. He runs the place here."

The woman nodded. Her eyes, behind an opaque veil which entirely concealed her features, regarded me intently. She was perhaps twenty-five years old, certainly not more. Deliberately she stared about the room. Almost mechanically she stepped past me and sank into a chair. In a peculiarly dull voice she said:

"I am tired. I have come a long way."

She *was* tired. Though her face was hidden from me, I could sense the exhaustion in it. She seemed suddenly to have lost the power of movement—almost the power of life itself. She sat perfectly still, staring straight before her. I thought, strangely, that she was on the verge of death.

"You—you wish to go to Peter?" I said gently.

"Peter?" she whispered, and raised her head slowly to look at me. "Peter? Yes. In a little while."

I studied her. Surely this woman loved Peter Mace, or she would not have gone to such trouble to find him. If so, she could help him. He needed help. He needed some one near and dear to him, to talk to him, to convince him that his horrible research was wicked. If this woman could do that, her coming would not be in vain.

"When you are rested," I said quietly, "I will take you to him. You had better sleep first. It is a long way."

She smiled, as if she were pitying me for not knowing something I ought to know.

"Yes," she said. "It is a long way, through the jungle. I know."

Then she slept.

DARKNESS had fallen when we began that journey to Peter Mace's house. We were alone. Captain Bruk had departed more than an hour ago, vowing that he wanted no more of her, and that so far as he was concerned he didn't care

if he "never set foot on Faikana's blasted beach again." The natives, tired of hanging about the house in hopes of satisfying their childish curiosities, had returned to the village. No one saw us begin that journey which was to have such a terrible end.

But I had no premonition of the end, then. I thought of Peter Mace, living alone in his isolated abode in the jungle, and I thanked God for sending the woman to aid him. Mysterious she was, to be sure—and not once had she given herself a name—but my hopes were high, and a queer confidence possessed me as I led her along the jungle trail. Even the jungle itself, black as death and full of sinister shapes and sounds, could not kill the song in my heart. I refused to consider the possible peril on all sides of us. I refused to be afraid. A merciful God had sent this woman to Faikana, and the same merciful God would conduct her safely to the end of her quest.

She, too, was unafraid. She followed boldly, deliberately, in my steps. She did not speak. Several times, when I turned to assist her through stretches of black morass, or over huge fallen stumps of aoa trees, she merely smiled and accepted my hand without comment.

So, finally, we reached the end of the trail and entered the clearing where Peter Mace's house loomed high before us. And for the first time, doubt assailed me.

Only one light burned in that grim structure—one light, pale and yellow behind the masked window of the upstairs room. Slowly we walked toward it, and even more slowly we ascended the veranda steps. I knocked hesitantly, and there was no answer. My hand trembled on the latch. The door swung open, and silently we entered.

There in the dark we stood side by side, the woman and I, and neither of us spoke. In the far corner of the room a feeble shaft of light descended from the ceiling, revealing the top rungs of the ladder and the uneven surface of the wall beside it. The aperture was closed. From the chamber above us came the deep, singsong voice of Peter Mace, uttering words which brought sudden terror to my heart.

There is no need to repeat those words here. Already I have described in detail the ritual for which that room of horror was designed. Enough to say that the horror, this time, was nearing its climax —that *other* voices, born of lips which had no human form, were slowly and terribly rising in a shrill crescendo, smothering the blasphemies which poured from the boy's throat. Even while the veiled woman and I stood motionless, those sounds rose to a mighty roar, screaming their triumph. And with them came the shrill, awful outcry of a woman in mortal anguish.

I wish now that I had yielded to the fear in my soul and fled from that evil place. I wish I had seized my companion's arm and dragged her back across the threshold. Instead, I remained rooted to the floor. I stood rigid, listening to the medley of mad voices that bellowed above me.

The whole house echoed those wild vibrations. Words of terrible significance, of frightful suggestiveness, were flung out of monstrous throats, to wail and scream into the deepest depths of my consciousness. Again and again I heard names hurled out which bore sufficient significance to spike my soul with nameless and uncontrollable dread. And above them all, *within* them all, shrilled that wild screech of physical agony which tocsined from a woman's lips!

The awful din reached its climax while I stood there. For a long moment the walls around me, the ceiling above, the

floor below, trembled as if in the grip of a great wind. Then, slowly, the sounds subsided. Slowly they died to a sinister whispering and muttering in which I could distinguish no individual words. And finally only one audible sound remained — the low, passionate voice of Peter Mace, speaking in triumphant tones which were, in themselves, all too significant.

Then I moved. Mechanically I turned from the woman beside me and paced toward the ladder in the corner. Fearfully I ascended the wooden rungs, holding myself erect with hands that shook violently as they groped upward at a snail's pace. From the chamber above me, the boy's voice came in fitful exclamations, uttering words of triumph, of endearment. Wildly he was saying:

"It is finished! Beloved, it is finished! The agony has destroyed the death; the life is complete! They promised me it would be so, and they have fulfilled their promise. Oh, my beloved, come to me!"

I shuddered, and for a long time clung motionless to my perch, fearing to ascend higher. Had I been aware of the scene which would meet my gaze when I reached up to drag the wooden covering from the aperture above me, I would have flung myself back down the ladder and left that evil chamber for ever undisturbed. But I did not know. I slid aside the barrier. I heaved myself to the floor above. And I saw.

THE room was a well of darkness, illuminated only by the sputtering candle on the table. Before me stood Peter Mace, disheveled and ragged, his head flung back and his bare feet planted on the crude atap mat which covered the floor. In his arms, pressed close against his emaciated body, clung a naked woman —a woman whose skin was as white and as smooth as fine-grained gypsum. Lovely she was. Too lovely. And then I realized the truth.

Abruptly I turned and stared at the cloth-covered pedestal in the corner—the pedestal where the marble woman had sat. Then, in horror, I stared again at the creature in Peter Mace's embrace. And she was the same woman. God help me, she was the same! Those horrors of outer darkness had given her the power of life! The woman in Peter Mace's arms, clinging to him, was a woman of living stone!

I stared, unable to believe what I knew to be true. The very frightfulness of it prevented me from assimilating its whole significance. I merely stared, and heard words issuing from her lips, and heard him answering them. Then, after an eternity, I stood erect and said aloud:

"A woman is here to see you, Peter."

Peter Mace turned, very slowly, releasing the naked thing in his arms. He looked at me steadily, as if bewildered by my presence. He peered all around him, as if puzzled even by the room in which he stood. Then he said quietly:

"A woman? To see me?"

"Yes," I nodded. "She's waiting."

He came toward me. He did not understand. His forehead was creased and his lips frowning. Leaving his companion where she was, he stepped past me and slowly descended the ladder. The stone woman said nothing; she stood very still, watching him. Silently I followed him down the creaking rungs to the room below, where the other woman was waiting. And then it was my turn to be bewildered.

Peter Mace and the woman in black stared at each other. Neither moved. For a full moment, neither spoke. The very intensity of their stares — the very completeness of their silence—indicated a

climactic something which I did not fully comprehend. I felt that when the woman did speak, she would scream. But she did not. She said calmly:

"You sent for me, Peter. I'm here."

He moved toward her. Behind and above him a muffled creaking sound came from the wooden ladder, but none of us turned. The boy was still gazing with horribly wide eyes. He said falteringly:

"You — you are not dead? You're here? How can that be?"

"I *was* dead, Peter."

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"I was dead, but you gave me life. I came to you."

The boy seemed not to understand. Not until she raised her hands and drew the veil from her face—not until then did he realize the hideous results of the sins he had committed. And I realized them, too. The woman before me was Peter Mace's loved one. She was walking in death! She had been raised from the grave by the hellish rituals performed by him! This—this woman before me—was the flesh and blood reality from whom he and his artist companion had designed that stone creature in the room above us! The likeness was unmistakable!

But there was a difference. The face of this corpse-woman was lovely only because she had *made* it lovely. Beneath the mask of powder which covered it, death had written with an indelible pencil, leaving certain signs which could never be erased. Little wonder she had worn a veil! Little wonder she had refused to reveal herself to me, or to Captain Bruk, or to any of the people who had come in contact with her! Yet Peter Mace, her lover, failed to see what the grave had done. He was blinded to all but her loveliness. He reached out his arms and stepped toward her, and with terrible eagerness he crushed her against him.

I stood close to them, unable to move away. Again I heard the creaking of the ladder behind me, but still I did not turn. Nothing mattered but the pitiful thing which was occurring before me. I saw only this wild-eyed, sobbing boy, holding in his arms the woman who had been returned to him—the woman who, resurrected from her distant grave by the far-reaching powers of his unholy rites, had found her way across half the earth to reach his arms. Again and again he cried her name aloud. Over and over he sobbed words of endearment. All his loneliness and longing poured through his lips, and his soul was bare for her to look at.

And then some sixth sense made me turn—or perhaps it was the thud of heavy feet striking the floor behind me. I swung slowly about, and stood transfixed. There, at the foot of the ladder, stood the stone woman whom Peter Mace had created.

As long as I live, the expression of her face will haunt me. Her eyes were as dark and deep as midnight pits. Her lips were drawn back over parted teeth, in a snarl of animal hate. She had heard the boy's every word. She had witnessed his every act. And now her once-beautiful face was contorted. She was a savage beast whose mate had deserted her. She meant murder.

Slowly, with awful deliberation, she advanced across the floor. She did not see me, did not consider my presence. She had eyes only for Peter Mace and the woman who clung to him. Straight past me she walked, so close that I might have reached out and touched her. And I—God help me!—I stood like a graven image, utterly unable to move or to shriek a warning.

I did not see all of what happened. Her back was toward me, and she was

between me and her victims. But I saw and heard enough to blast my soul.

Peter Mace was whispering to his loved one, uttering low words of love and happiness. His voice suddenly ceased, then screamed aloud in terror. He leaped backward, then flung himself forward again. He might have escaped, had he not hurled himself upon that relentless stone figure in a futile attempt to protect his beloved. Those hideous fingers had already gripped the other woman's throat. Peter Mace tore at them madly, in an effort to dislodge them.

He might better have thought of his own safety. Slowly and surely those stone fingers committed murder. The corpse-woman sank backward to the floor, staring with dead eyes at the ceiling. The fingers released their grip.

Not until then did the boy realize the futility of resistance. Not until then did he seek to escape. Then it was too late. Those infernal hands buried themselves in the flesh of his neck. His lips opened to release a prolonged shriek of agony. The shriek became a bloody gurgle. He hung suspended, his feet beating a terrible tattoo on the floor. When she released him, he fell across the body of the woman beneath him; and he, like her, was dead.

The room, then, was filled with the silence of death. The stone woman stood over her victims, gazing down at them. An eternity passed. Slowly, and still without speaking, the woman turned and paced to the door. Her groping hand raised the latch; the door creaked inward. Staring straight ahead of her, she walked across the veranda and descended the steps. Stiffly, and with that same hideous deliberation, she paced toward the jungle. The darkness of the outer night claimed her, and she was gone.

THAT is all. That is why I, Father Jason, went away from Faikana the next day, taking my native people with me. Risking death in clumsy pahis, we paddled for two days and a night on the open sea, to reach the sparsely inhabited atoll of Mehu, where we might begin life over again. That is why, in the clearing on Faikana where Peter Mace's horror-house stands, you will find a crude slab of tou wood planted for men to look upon; and you will read the words: *"Inei Teavi o te mata epoa o Faikana"*—which mean, literally: "Here lie the bodies of the lovers of Faikana."

But Faikana is inhabited by one living person only—a woman created for love, out of sin. And she is a stone woman who may not die, who may not find peace, until those unnamable horrors of the world of darkness take pity on her and relieve her of the life they gave her.

"Its teeth were bared, and a savage fury flamed in its little wrinkled eyes."

The Beast-Helper

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

The story of a dictator who sought to hold power by allying himself psychically with a powerful beast

1. The Dark Shape

THE Dictator sat energetically erect, and delivered his pronouncements in a cold, metallic tone. To the American correspondent he seemed like an automaton—a flesh-and-blood machine that functioned at white heat, and expressed itself in a manner wholly remorseless.

The Dictator sat before his desk in his spacious, walnut-paneled study. His fat, pudgy face was aglow with fanatical rancor.

"Trivania will become the most powerful corporate state in Eastern Europe," he said. "Our cause is a sanctified one, and we shall march from triumph to triumph. We intend ruthlessly to suppress all—dissenting opinion."

The American correspondent was scrib-

bling hastily. Suddenly he looked up, looked at the Dictator. "May I quote this?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Thompson. You may quote me at length."

Mr. Thompson was a thin, pale little man with mild blue eyes. He looked conspicuously harmless, to the Dictator. A smile of scorn curled the Dictator's heavy lips as he contemplated the press man.

But the American correspondent had more iron in him than the Dictator. It was a different kind of iron. Mr. Thompson was a profound skeptic and a scientific humanist. To Mr. Thompson the Dictator was a savage barbarian.

The Dictator continued to profess himself. "We shall be merciless to the critics of the state," he said. "Representative government is an absurdity, an historical anachronism. We will relentlessly repress——"

Suddenly he stopped, and his mouth fell open.

The desk before which he was sitting was illumined by a green-shaded arc lamp which cast a diffused radiance on the wall behind him. The rest of the room was in semi-darkness.

Something had opened the door on the other side of the room, and as the Dictator stared and gasped in sudden terror a shadow fell on the illumined section of the wall. The shadow was visible to Thompson. The thing in the doorway, whatever it was, was visible only to the Dictator.

Thompson didn't follow the Dictator's gaze. The shadow held and riveted his attention. It was a humped, aberrant shape, nebulously human in outline, and as it hovered above the Prophet of Power it gestured menacingly with its long arms.

The Dictator sprang from his chair with a hoarse cry, and lurched toward the door.

Thompson turned slowly about in his chair. He was far too startled to turn speedily, and when his gaze swept the door it encountered only a very frightened fat man cowering white-faced against the closed portal.

Thompson felt a cold chill at the nape of his neck. He got quickly to his feet and started toward the door.

The Dictator raised a tremulous hand. "Sit down, Mr. Thompson," he said. "It was only an attendant."

Thompson looked at him. His face was twisted with fright.

"Sit down, please," reiterated the Dictator.

He crossed the room and resumed his position behind his desk.

Thompson was genuinely shaken. It was on the tip of his tongue to blurt out that the shadow he had seen was *not* that of an attendant, but something in the Dictator's manner restrained him.

He did not resume his seat, however. Gathering up his papers he thrust them into a portfolio, and excused himself with as much tactful adroitness as he could summon.

2. *The Little Professor*

THOMPSON dined in a modest restaurant on a dark, narrow street. All about him impoverished Trivanians sipped diluted and inferior wines, and discussed the November Revolution in awed whispers. The name of Kerriling, the new dictator, was on everyone's lips. Some murmured that he was a brutal tyrant—a cruel, egoistic madman with a Messianic complex, and that the reign of terror and ruthlessness which he had inaugurated would outrage the moral sense of Western Europe. Others praised Kerriling, and proclaimed that he was the savior of his people, and that his critics were traitors, or worse.

Thompson sat at a small table in a corner of the restaurant, sipping a sherry punch and staring abstractedly at the waiters as they moved about between the tables. Despite his abstracted gaze his mind was very busy. He was confronted with the appalling necessity of explaining a great horror in rationalistic terms.

His mind refused to tolerate the naked memory of what he had seen. It spewed it forth, embellished and modified, and as he sat sipping his beverage a giddiness came upon him.

He *had* seen a shadow, monstrous, ghastly, unspeakable—and Kerriling had seen the thing itself. But surely, his mind kept clamoring, the shadow had been merely a queer and freakish distortion of a perfectly normal human shape. A freak of lighting had magnified and distorted it, no doubt, but surely the form itself, the reality behind the caricature—had been quite normal. A *thing?* Preposterous! And yet it was difficult if not impossible to ignore the certain significance of Kerriling's fright, and the abnormal outlines and queer, purblind jerkiness of the shadow's movements.

A little man at a near-by table had been watching Thompson intently. Now he rose and crossed to where the journalist was sitting.

He had a lean, darkly-bearded face. His nose was sharp, his mouth saturnine and thin-lipped, and he wore blue-tinted spectacles. He was attired in evening clothes, and a thin yellow ribbon spanned his white shirt-front. He sat down opposite Thompson and rested his thin hands on the checkered table-cloth.

"I've been observing you," he said. "You've been trying to drown the stench of Kerriling in that bouquet." He pointed to the wine.

Thompson raised his eyes, and stared in astonishment.

The little man said, "I am Doctor Carl Luton. I am director of the Trivanian Academy of the Natural Sciences, and senior professor of anthropology at the University of Sisbeck."

Thompson's brow furrowed. "Doctor Luton?" he murmured. "Yes, of course. You were formerly the Minister of Education."

Doctor Luton nodded. "I was Kerriling's intimate adviser until a fortnight ago. I was at the palace this afternoon, and one of the servants informed me that the Dictator had granted you an interview."

Thompson nodded. "Yes, I saw him," he said.

Doctor Luton's eyes narrowed. "And were you—satisfied?"

"I'm not quite sure I understand you, Doctor," said Thompson.

"You expected that the Dictator would put his foot into it, as you Americans say. I know you expected something of the sort. Kerriling has thrown caution and discretion to the winds. He is now wholly obsessed with his brutal and ferocious dogmas."

Thompson nodded. "The Dictator was very frank," he said. "He advocates a ruthless military imperialism as a national policy, and seems quite determined to destroy all liberal and dissenting groups."

Luton said: "You know, of course, that he has already disposed of the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Public Health, and the Minister of War?"

Thompson looked nervously about him.

"We are safe enough here," said Luton. "If it is treason to call Kerriling a murderer I am prepared to take the consequences. I am no longer afraid of the beast."

"But Doctor, surely——"

Doctor Luton leaned forward. "Listen, my friend. I have decided to reveal

to you the secret of Kerriling's hideous power and dominance, so that you will be on your guard. I know that you hate Kerriling as much as I do. I have read your very able articles in the American press. Kerriling will never permit you to leave Trivania in a whole skin. He believes that you have caused even his friends in America to turn against him."

Thompson turned slightly pale. "You are sure of this?"

Luton nodded grimly. "I *know* Kerriling. The brute in him has gained strength from communion with something indescribably bestial."

The American's mind leapt back to the interview, and the horror that had terminated it. What, in God's name, was the little professor hinting at?

Luton's eyes narrowed until they were thin gray slits. He said: "Kerriling does not live alone in the palace. *He has a servitor.*"

Thompson felt a sort of shiver go through him.

Luton wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "It is a thing so awful that I am reluctant to describe it. I alone am responsible. Had I refused to reveal the mechanism of my brain-tube, Kerriling would have killed me. But now I have the deaths of three men to atone for."

For an instant the little man was silent. Then he said: "When Kerriling says to the beast, 'Kill!' it goes forth with the blood-lust upon it. It creeps through the narrow dark streets at night when no one is about, and climbs into open windows, and twines its huge hairy hands about the throats of its victims. It has the strength of ten men."

THE little doctor poured himself a drink from a bottle of Rhine wine. As he quaffed it, his hand shook.

"The Minister of War," he affirmed, "had his throat torn away. The Minister of Finance was found with his back broken. The Minister of Public Health was brutally strangled."

The little man was sweating profusely. He seemed to be nerving himself for an ordeal. It was a full half-minute before he spoke again.

"I will tell you all I know. Kerriling keeps in the palace a huge male gorilla. It obeys his will. When he commands it to slay, it slays. I gave the gorilla to Kerriling. The animal came from my private zoo.

"For several years I have been conducting a series of experiments with the great apes. I have perfected a device which I have called the brain-tube. It is a thin, metallic instrument with a rhythmically moving central axis, and by applying one pole to the cerebral cortex of a human subject and the other to the infinitely less evolved brain of an anthropoid ape I have succeeded in bridging the gulf between the two organs of thought to an extent that would astound and horrify you."

Luton helped himself to another drink.

"The highest centers," he resumed, "are not affected. The communication is subconscious, primordial. From man to ape there flows a stream of deep, subterranean understanding. If you are familiar with the Jung school of analytical psychology you will not need to be told that deep within us, far below the little civilized substratum of consciousness which we call the human brain, there lurks a great writhing mass of primal sense-images, memories, thoughts, dreams, instinctive-habit patterns which are not in any sense human.

"Jung affirms that every human being carries within him these brutish vestiges of life-cycles long since discarded or transcended. Far below the man-mind

in us there lurks an ape-mind, and below the ape-mind, a reptile-mind, and below that a fish-mind, and so on down the scale till we reach life's dark and obscure beginnings.

"I have always believed that communication between man and beast on the basis of *shared* memories and habit-patterns was theoretically possible. But the deepest layers would naturally be the hardest to reach. In man's slow climb toward the stars he has discarded layer after layer of his animal self. Deep within us is a reptile-mind, but its memories are buried beneath the debris of a hundred million years, and to tap that fount would be difficult, if not impossible. But the great apes are very much nearer to us in time. They have shared with us a recent and common heritage."

He raised his glass again, drained it dry.

"To connect the brain-tube, a tiny hole must be drilled in the skull of both subjects. It is a risky and dangerous operation. But Kerriling submitted to it. He wanted a servitor very badly. He prided himself on his cunning and iron will. He felt confident that he could convey his desires to the ape, and that the ape would obey him. He was not impressed by the scientific grandeur of the experiment. He cared nothing for science. He was a vicious and brutal politician, intent only on feathering his own nest by violent and bloody means.

"He envisaged the ape as a helpless tool in his hands, as an instrument of vengeance. With the aid of the beast he could slaughter with impunity his personal and political enemies."

The little scientist was tugging nervously at the loose skin of his throat. Thompson's eyes were fixed on the man's face.

"I vigorously opposed him. But he threatened me with the block. He has revived the executioner's block, as you know. He said that if I refused to help him, my neck would feel the knife. I fear that I am something of a coward. To a modern man that kind of death is unspeakably awful.

"I pleaded with him, but he was stubborn, determined. So in desperation I acceded to his request. I arranged for the operation. I was present when he lay etherized upon the table. He was at my mercy then, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to betray him. I could not kill him, even though I knew he deserved to die. I told the surgeon how to proceed, stood at his elbow and guided his mind and hand.

"The skull-pan was laid open and a small incision made in the cerebral tissue. Then a permanent hole was drilled in the skull, and the larger suture was reset.

"The operation was a complete success. In a fortnight Kerriling was up and about, and only a small opening in the skull remained to mark the site of the incision.

"The gorilla was promptly anesthetized. It was bound with iron bands to the table, and in the presence of eight powerful attendants the ether cone was placed above its brutish countenance, and it lapsed into a deep sleep.

"I directed the operation in a kind of morbid trance, and when the animal's primitive brain came into view I experienced a sick revulsion.

"Yet the second operation was as successful as the first. The ape recovered its strength quickly, and in a few days we thought it safe to proceed."

Doctor Luton's face was very pale.

"The ape was chained to the wall in one of the small upper rooms of the Dictator's palace. It was spread-eagled against the wall, with ponderous steel

links on its arms and legs, and a metal band about its hairy torso. It bellowed and squirmed, and yellow froth appeared on its bestial muzzle, but it was securely fastened.

"Kerriling was fearless. He stood beside the roaring beast, and smiled calmly and coldly as I adjusted the tube. One end went through the hole in his skull, and rested on the naked brain-stuff within. The other end rested on the unfathomable, primal brain of the great beast.

"MY HANDS shook as I set the revolving interior axis in motion. A great awe and dread of the unknown rested upon me. Revulsion vied in my mind with a consuming, insatiable curiosity, and as the inner axis began speedily to whirl, the blood in my temples began a furious pounding.

"For several seconds the axis revolved, making a subdued, whirring sound. Then, with appalling suddenness, the ape ceased its savage lashings. Its enormous chinless jaw seemed to vibrate, to squirm, and into its eyes there came a look of wild and unutterable fright.

"Kerriling also responded, quickly, terribly. His features contracted, his eyes bulged. At the corners of his mouth a thin foam accumulated.

"I was horribly frightened. I wavered on my feet and was compelled to lean against the wall for support.

"The contraction of Kerriling's features is difficult to describe. The muscles of his face seemed to draw the flesh together in little folds and puckers, as though the normal avenues of facial expression had somehow clogged. For an instant stark madness looked out of his eyes.

"In frantic terror my gaze passed from this twitching mask and fastened on the countenance of the ape. It, too, had undergone a startling change. It was no longer snarling and distorted. A great calmness seemed to rest upon it. It was like the face of a dead beast, peaceful and utterly relaxed.

"For an instant I experienced relief. Then I looked again at Kerriling, and my heart ceased to beat. Kerriling's features had shed their human cast. They were convulsed, bestial, malign. His lips writhed back from his teeth and a wild light flamed in his eyes.

"I thought for an instant he was going to spring at me. I swayed and retreated a pace. His lips continued to writhe. I was dazed with fright, but instinctively I reached forward and disconnected the tube.

"As I did so he bent, and sank his teeth into my wrist. I cried out, and lurched away from him. He followed me across the room. I seized a weapon from the wall behind me, and threatened him with it. He backed away, snarling.

"I stared in terror. For a moment he continued to circle about, snarling, grimacing, threatening me with his hands. The fingers of his hands were splayed. He moved them backward and forward, as a beast would.

"Then, gradually, the ferocity faded from his face. He moaned, and sank down upon the floor in a dead faint."

The little professor was trembling, and his face was very pale.

Thompson was shivering also. The restaurant was nearly deserted now, and it seemed horribly empty and cold, like a morgue.

"I should have killed him then," said Luton in a hopeless tone. "The Greek Trivanians in West Duksburg were ruthlessly massacred because I did not kill him. The great and gentle-spirited historian Burkovan was sent into exile because I did not kill him. The Minister of

War had his throat torn out because I did not kill him. May heaven forgive me for my cowardice."

Tragic suffering looked out of his eyes.

"I am directly responsible for all the atrocities which Kerriling has committed," he went on. "Kerriling's mind subdued and controlled the ape's mind, *but something from the beast flowed into him.*"

He rose from the table.

"I must go now," he said. "I have warned you. Be on your guard."

He stood for a moment gazing at Thompson with compassionate eyes. Then, with a sigh, he took down a black cape from a rack in the corner, and walked slowly from the restaurant. Thompson watched him pass through the revolving glass door and advance slowly down the street outside. He carried a walking-stick, and he hesitated, and looked in at Thompson as he passed the window of the restaurant.

WHEN Luton vanished from sight, Thompson shivered. It was colder than ever. He summoned the waiter. "My check, please," he said.

A few minutes later he was threading his way through a squalid and silent slum. It was impossible to conceive of a street more dismal, empty and sordid than the one which echoed his footfalls as he moved along its gloomy length. It was virtually a cavern flanked by houses which were rotten with age, and whose gambrels met in a dizzy embrace above his head. The stones beneath his feet were tilted at irregular angles, and were overgrown with straggling weeds and a noisome mildew which made them as slippery as ice.

Thompson's immediate objective was his hotel, and he was glad that it was located in a pleasant neighborhood, and that the slum would soon vanish from his ken. He had chosen the slum route because it was the shortest and because time was precious in his sight. He intended to pack his belongings and escape from Trivania as quickly as possible.

Not that he wholly believed the little professor. As he sped along the dark street he kept repeating over and over that Doctor Luton had been insane, or drunk. He kept repeating it to himself, as a deaf man will sometimes whistle to keep his courage from evaporating completely. He was really insane with fright.

It was past midnight, and the weather was as chilly and depressing as a damp shroud. No footfalls besides his own echoed on the slabbed pavement, and the windows of the houses were vacant and lightless.

Fear clutched at his vitals as he walked. He accelerated his pace until he was almost running. The professor, he kept repeating, was mad. For a time the reiterated assurance sustained him, filled him with a kind of panicky bravado. But as the dark street continuously lengthened before him, and he awoke to the magnitude of the slum in terms of blocks still to be traversed, his courage forsook him entirely. He broke into a sweat, and his pace faltered. And in the same instant, almost directly behind him, he heard something panting in the darkness.

He whirled in terror.

For an instant he thought that the enormous black shape was a shadow. It leapt and wavered like a shadow, and seemed to fill the street with its bulk. It was not a shadow, however. It was something massive and alive and menacingly concrete.

Thompson shrieked when he recognized it. He swayed and took a frantic step backward. As he did so his foot slipped, and he went down on the slimy pavement. The gorilla moved cumber-

somely forward, beating with its clenched fists on its resonant chest.

For an instant it towered above the prostrate American. Its teeth were bared, and a savage fury flamed in its little wrinkled eyes.

Thompson cried out again, tried to evade the menace by lurching frantically sideways on his knees. But the gorilla fell on him with a snarl of rage, and encircled his body with its great arms.

A nauseous stench filled Thompson's nostrils. He squirmed and groaned. The gorilla's arms tightened about him in a malignant hug. Thompson felt a stab in his lungs. His chest seemed on fire.

He raised both hands and tore at the foul-smelling hair of the monster's head. With a scream of rage the gorilla withdrew its arms. Raising its paws it gripped Thompson by the wrists of both hands, and tore away his hold. Thompson turned on his side, and kicked the gorilla violently in the stomach.

A bellow of pain issued from the gorilla's throat. It rolled over, and dragged Thompson with it. Thompson was now in a position of vantage.

He had one hand free. With a convulsive effort he thrust it beneath his coat and drew it forth again. As the gorilla tightened its hold he pressed the cold nozzle of a .38-caliber revolver against the beast's hairy side.

The gorilla made no sound when the bullet plowed through him. There was a heavy thud, and Thompson felt the reverberations in every part of his body. He fired again. The gorilla's great bulk was suddenly convulsed. A roar of agony, deep, raucous, abysmal, issued from its throat.

Releasing Thompson, it leapt into the air, and descended, and leapt high again. It roared and screeched and clutched at its side and belly with its paws.

Thompson was bruised and bleeding. But he swayed to his feet and fired again. As he fired he backed away quickly, his eyes burning in his taut face.

The gorilla collapsed. It fell forward upon its face, and its arms jerked convulsively for a moment. Then it ceased to move.

Thompson dropped the revolver, and staggered away into the darkness.

3. *"The Dictator Is Dead!"*

A HUGE crowd milled about the Dictator's palace. Men and women shouted, screamed, wept. Kerriling's mounted guards raged amidst the populace, splitting skulls, trampling the unwary under foot.

From a thousand throats came a single exultant cry: "The beast is dead! Kerriling is dead!"

On the edge of the crowd a little man stood swaying dizzily in the glare of the torches. He was hatless, disheveled, with tousled hair. There was blood upon his clothes, his face.

Suddenly a face whiter than his own came close to him in the darkness, and a familiar voice said: "You *did* kill Kerriling. You *did*."

Thompson started violently.

Doctor Luton gripped his arm. "Where have you been?" he cried. "I have searched everywhere for you. I wanted to protect you from Kerriling, if I could. I did not know that Kerriling was stricken until this morning. His advisers kept it a secret. When I learned you had killed the beast I searched everywhere, but was unable to find you. I am glad that you are safe."

The American passed his hand before his forehead. "I have been—ill," he murmured. "I remember sleeping in a park, and walking in the country somewhere. It is all horribly indistinct. The

veil lifted for a few hours, and descended again."

Luton said: "You must rest, my friend. You must come with me."

Thompson muttered: "Why did you say I had killed Kerriling?"

The little scientist looked at him. "Thought-transference is not a myth," he said. "When the deep mind of the race is stirred, the deep hidden mind which we share with the beasts, it may well be that emotions and even pains and injuries can be transmitted through the ether in potent, invisible waves."

He nodded grimly. "Kerriling died because four deep abscesses developed in his side three hours after you poured four shots into the gorilla."

The American started, swayed.

Luton said: "You are very tired, my friend. Our guest room is unoccupied, and my wife is an excellent cook. Come along."

A Ship Is Sailing

By KATHERINE VAN DER VEER

Autumn comes with steady tread, wild winds blowing;
Up and down the garden walk dahlias are in bloom.
It's little that I care today for all their gaudy showing:
A most disturbing letter has come into my room.

For there's a ship that's sailing to lands I've never seen,
To lonely lava islands with beaches white as snow,
Where slender gold-brown women dress in turquoise, henna, green,
Where creaming waves come rolling in, and palms and orchids grow.

All along the garden walk, leaves will soon be dancing,
Flowers will tremble, limp and black—what is that to me?
Out across the ocean's rim a great ship will be glancing,
Veering gulls will follow her as far as eye can see.

Bali, with her carven shrines, tree-fern fronds uncoiling,
Dancers clad in gleaming silk, with trays of fruit and flowers,
Carabaos, wrinkled crones, youth and beauty foiling,
Mellow gongs of burnished bronze to beat away the hours.

Singapore and Java, names of lure and glamor!
Life must hold me tethered here. Can anybody say
How to keep a dream-sick heart from a sudden tremor
When a magic ship goes out, sailing down the bay?

"It was weird to watch him walking, a lone figure in the midst of infinity."

The Distortion Out of Space

By FRANCIS FLAGG

A weird-scientific story of a strange being that came from the deeps of outer space in a meteoroid

BACK of Bear Mountain the meteor fell that night. Jim Blake and I saw it falling through the sky. As large as a small balloon it was and trailed a fiery tail. We knew it struck earth within a few miles of our camp, and later we saw the glare of a fire dully lighting the heavens. Timber is sparse on the farther slope of Bear Mountain, and what little there is of it is stunted and grows in patches, with wide intervals of barren and rocky ground. The fire did not spread to any extent and soon burned itself out.

Seated by our campfire we talked of meteoroids, those casual visitants from outer space which are usually small and consumed by heat on entering earth's atmosphere. Jim spoke of the huge one that had fallen in northern Arizona be-

fore the coming of the white man; and of another, more recent, which fell in Siberia.

"Fortunately," he said, "meteors do little damage; but if a large one were to strike a densely populated area, I shudder to think of the destruction to life and property. Ancient cities may have been blotted out in some such catastrophe. I don't believe that this one we just saw fell anywhere near Simpson's ranch."

"No," I said, "it hit too far north. Had it landed in the valley we couldn't have seen the reflection of the fire it started. We're lucky it struck no handier to us."

The next morning, full of curiosity, we climbed to the crest of the mountain, a distance of perhaps two miles. Bear Mountain is really a distinctive hog's-back of some height, with more rugged and higher mountain peaks around and beyond it. No timber grows on the summit, which, save for tufts of bear-grass and yucca, is rocky and bare. Looking down the farther side from the eminence attained, we saw that an area of hillside was blasted and still smoking. The meteor, however, had buried itself out of sight in earth and rock, leaving a deep crater some yards in extent.

About three miles away, in the small valley below, lay Henry Simpson's ranch, seemingly undamaged. Henry was a licensed guide, and when he went into the mountains after deer, we made his place our headquarters. Henry was not visible as we approached, nor his wife; and a certain uneasiness hastened our steps when we perceived that a portion of the house-roof—the house was built of adobe two stories high and had a slightly pitched roof made of rafters across which corrugated iron strips were nailed—was twisted and rent.

"Good heavens!" said Jim; "I hope a fragment of that meteorite hasn't done any damage here."

Leaving the burros to shift for themselves, we rushed into the house. "Hey, Henry!" I shouted. "Henry! Henry!"

Never shall I forget the sight of Henry Simpson's face as he came tottering down the broad stairs. Though it was eight o'clock in the morning, he still wore pajamas. His gray hair was tousled, his eyes staring.

"Am I mad, dreaming?" he cried hoarsely.

He was a big man, all of six feet tall, not the ordinary mountaineer, and though over sixty years of age possessed of great physical strength. But now his shoulders sagged, he shook as if with palsy.

"For heaven's sake, what's the matter?" demanded Jim. "Where's your wife?"

Henry Simpson straightened himself with an effort.

"Give me a drink." Then he said strangely: "I'm in my right mind—of course I must be in my right mind—but how can that thing upstairs be possible?"

"What thing? What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I was sleeping soundly when the bright light wakened me. That was last night, hours and hours ago. Something crashed into the house."

"A piece of the meteorite," said Jim, looking at me.

"Meteorite?"

"One fell last night on Bear Mountain. We saw it fall."

Henry Simpson lifted a gray face. "It may have been that."

"You wakened, you say?"

"Yes, with a cry of fear. I thought the place had been struck by lightning. 'Lydia!' I screamed, thinking of my wife. But Lydia never answered. The bright light had blinded me. At first I could see nothing. Then my vision cleared,

Still I could see nothing—though the room wasn't dark."

"What!"

"Nothing, I tell you. No room, no walls, no furniture; only whichever way I looked, emptiness. I had leapt from bed in my first waking moments and couldn't find it again. I walked and walked, I tell you, and ran and ran; but the bed had disappeared, the room had disappeared. It was like a nightmare. I tried to wake up. I was on my hands and knees, crawling, when someone shouted my name. I crawled toward the sound of that voice, and suddenly I was in the hallway above, outside my room door. I dared not look back. I was afraid, I tell you, afraid. I came down the steps."

He paused, wavered. We caught him and eased his body down on a sofa.

"For God's sake," he whispered, "go find my wife."

Jim said soothingly: "There, there, sir, your wife is all right." He motioned me imperatively with his hand. "Go out to our cabin, Bill, and bring me my bag."

I DID as he bade. Jim was a practising physician and never travelled without his professional kit. He dissolved a morphine tablet, filled a hypodermic, and shot its contents into Simpson's arm. In a few minutes, the old man sighed, relaxed, and fell into heavy slumber.

"Look," said Jim, pointing.

The soles of Simpson's feet were bruised, bleeding, the pajamas shredded at the knees, the knees lacerated.

"He didn't dream it," muttered Jim at length. "He's been walking and crawling, all right."

We stared at each other. "But, good Lord, man!" I exclaimed.

"I know," said Jim. He straightened up. "There's something strange here. I'm going upstairs. Are you coming?"

Together we mounted to the hall above. I didn't know what we expected to find. I remember wondering if Simpson had done away with his wife and was trying to act crazy. Then I recollected that both Jim and I had observed the damage to the roof. Something *had* struck the house. Perhaps that something had killed Mrs. Simpson. She was an energetic woman, a few years younger than her husband, and not the sort to be lying quietly abed at such an hour.

Filled with misgivings, we reached the landing above and stared down the corridor. The corridor was well lighted by means of a large window at its extreme end. Two rooms opened off this corridor, one on each side. The doors to both were ajar.

The first room into which we glanced was a kind of writing-room and library. I have said that Simpson was no ordinary mountaineer. As a matter of fact, he was a man who read widely and kept abreast of the better publications in current literature.

The second room was the bedchamber. Its prosaic door—made of smoothed planks—swung outward. It swung toward us, half open, and in the narrow corridor we had to draw it still further open to pass. Then:

"My God!" said Jim.

Rooted to the floor, we both stared. Never shall I forget the sheer astonishment of that moment. For beyond the door, where a bedroom should have been, there was——

"Oh, it's impossible!" I muttered.

I looked away. Yes, I was in a narrow corridor, a house. Then I glanced back, and the effect was that of gazing into the emptiness of illimitable space. My trembling fingers gripped Jim's arm. I am

not easily terrified. Men of my calling—aviation—have to possess steady nerves. Yet there was something so strange, so weird about the sight that I confess to a wave of fear. The space stretched away on all sides beyond that door, as space stretches away from one who, lying on his back on a clear day, stares at the sky. But this space was not bright with sunlight. It was a gloomy space, gray, intimidating; a space in which no stars or moon or sun were discernible. And it was a space that had—aside from its gloom—a quality of indirectness. . . .

"Jim," I whispered hoarsely, "do you see it too?"

"Yes, Bill, yes."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. An optical illusion, perhaps. Something has upset the perspective in that room."

"Upset?"

"I'm trying to think."

He brooded a moment. Though a practising physician, Jim is interested in physics and higher mathematics. His papers on the relativity theory have appeared in many scientific journals.

"Space," he said, "has no existence aside from matter. You know that. Nor aside from time." He gestured quickly. "There's Einstein's concept of matter being a kink in space, of a universe at once finite and yet infinite. It's all abstruse and hard to grasp." He shook his head. "But in outer space, far beyond the reach of our most powerful telescopes, things may not function exactly as they do on earth. Laws may vary, phenomena the direct opposite of what we are accustomed to may exist."

His voice sank. I stared at him, fascinated.

"And that meteoroid from God knows where!" He paused a moment. "I am positive that this phenomenon we witness is connected with it. Something came to earth in that meteor and has lodged in this room, something possessing alien properties, that is able to distort, warp——" His voice died away.

I stared fearfully through the open door. "Good heavens," I said, "what can it be? What would have the power to create such an illusion?"

"If it *is* an illusion," muttered Jim. "Perhaps it is no more an illusion than the environment in which we have our being and which we scarcely question. Don't forget that Simpson wandered through it for hours. Oh, it sounds fantastic, impossible, I know, and at first I believed he was raving; but now . . . now . . ." He straightened abruptly. "Mrs. Simpson is somewhere in that room, in that incredible space, perhaps wandering about, lost, frightened. I'm going in."

I pleaded with him to wait, to reconsider. "If you go, I'll go too," I said.

He loosened my grip. "No, you must stay by the door to guide me with your voice."

DESPITE my further protestations, he stepped through the doorway. In doing so it seemed that he must fall into an eternity of nothing.

"Jim!" I called fearfully. He glanced back, but whether he heard my voice I could not say. Afterward he said he hadn't.

It was weird to watch him walking—a lone figure in the midst of infinity. I tell you it was the weirdest and most incredible sight the eye of man has ever seen. "I must be asleep, dreaming," I thought; "this can't be real."

I had to glance away, to assure myself by a sight of the hall that I was actually awake. The room at most was only thirty feet from door to wall; yet Jim went on and on, down an everlasting vista of gray distance, until his figure began to shorten,

dwindle. Again I screamed, "Jim! Jim! Come back, Jim!" But in the very moment of my screaming, his figure flickered, went out, and in all the vast lonely reaches of that gloomy void, nowhere was he to be seen—nowhere!

I wonder if anyone can imagine a tithe of the emotions which swept over me at that moment. I crouched by the doorway to that incredible room, a prey to the most horrible fears and surmises. Anon I called out, "Jim! Jim!" but no voice ever replied, no familiar figure loomed on my sight.

The sun was high overhead when I went heavily down the stairs and out into the open. Simpson was still sleeping on the couch, the sleep of exhaustion. I remembered that he had spoken of hearing our voices calling him as he wandered through gray space, and it came over me as ominous and suggestive of disaster that my voice had, apparently, never reached Jim's ears, that no sound had come to my own ears out of the weird depths.

After the long hours of watching in the narrow corridor, of staring into alien space, it was with an inexpressible feeling of relief, of having escaped something horrible and abnormal, that I greeted the sun-drenched day. The burros were standing with drooping heads in the shade of a live-oak tree. Quite methodically I relieved them of their packs; then I filled and lit my pipe, doing everything slowly, carefully, as if aware of the need for restraint, calmness. On such little things does a man's sanity often depend. And all the time I stared at the house, at the upper portion of it where the uncanny room lay. Certain cracks showed in its walls and the roof above was twisted and torn. I asked myself, how was this thing possible? How, within the narrow confines of a single room, could the phenomenon of infinite space exist? Einstein, Eddington, Jeans—I had read their theories, and Jim might be correct, but the strangeness of it, the horror! You're mad, Bill, I said to myself, mad, mad! But there were the burros, there was the house. A scarlet tanager soared by, a hawk wheeled overhead, a covey of ring-necked mountain quail scuttled through tangled brush. No, I wasn't mad, I couldn't be dreaming, and Jim—Jim was somewhere in that accursed room, that distortion out of space, lost, wandering!

It was the most courageous thing I ever did in my life—to re-enter that house, climb those stairs. I had to force myself to do it, for I was desperately afraid and my feet dragged. But Simpson's ranch was in a lonely place, the nearest town or neighbor miles distant. It would take hours to fetch help, and of what use would it be when it did arrive? Besides, Bill needed aid, now, at once.

Though every nerve and fiber of my body rebelled at the thought, I fastened the end of a rope to a nail driven in the hall floor and stepped through the doorway. Instantly I was engulfed by endless space. It was a terrifying sensation. So far as I could see, my feet rested on nothing. Endless distance was below me as well as above. Sick and giddy, I paused and looked back, but the doorway had vanished. Only the coil of rope in my hands, and the heavy pistol in my belt, saved me from giving way to utter panic.

Slowly I paid out the rope as I advanced. At first it stretched into infinity like a sinuous serpent. Then suddenly all but a few yards of it disappeared. Fearfully I tugged at the end in my hands. It resisted the tug. The rope was still there, even if invisible to my eyes, every inch of it paid out; yet I was no nearer the confines of that room. Standing there with emptiness above, around, below me,

I knew the meaning of utter desolation, of fear and loneliness. This way and that I groped, at the end of my tether. Somewhere Jim must be searching and groping too. "Jim!" I shouted; and miraculously enough, in my very ear it seemed, Jim's voice bellowed, "Bill! Bill! Is that you, Bill?"

"Yes," I almost sobbed. "Where are you, Jim?"

"I don't know. This place has me bewildered. I've been wandering around for hours. Listen, Bill; everything is out of focus here, matter warped, light curved. Can you hear me, Bill?"

"Yes, yes. I'm here too, clinging to the end of a rope that leads to the door. If you could follow the sound of my voice——"

"I'm trying to do that. We must be very close to each other. Bill——" His voice grew faint, distant.

"Here!" I shouted, "here!"

Far off I heard his voice calling, receding.

"For God's sake, Jim, this way, this way!"

Suddenly the uncanny space appeared to shift, to eddy—I can describe what occurred in no other fashion—and for a moment in remote distance I saw Jim's figure. It was toiling up an endless hill, away from me; up, up; a black dot against an immensity of nothing. Then the dot flickered, went out, and he was gone. Sick with nightmarish horror, I sank to my knees, and even as I did so the realization of another disaster made my heart leap suffocatingly to my throat. In the excitement of trying to attract Jim's attention, I had dropped hold of the rope!

Panic leapt at me, sought to overwhelm me, but I fought it back. Keep calm, I told myself; don't move, don't lose your head; the rope must be lying at your feet. But though I felt carefully on all sides, I could not locate it. I tried to recollect if I had moved from my original position. Probably I had taken a step or two away from it, but in what direction? Hopeless to ask. In that infernal distortion of space and matter, there was nothing by which to determine direction. Yet I did not, I could not, abandon hope. The rope was my only guide to the outer world, the world of normal phenomena and life.

This way and that I searched, wildly, frantically, but to no purpose. At last I forced myself to stand quite still, closing my eyes to shut out the weird void. My brain functioned chaotically. Lost in a thirty-foot room, Jim, myself, and a woman, unable to locate one another—the thing was impossible, incredible. With trembling fingers I took out my pipe, pressed tobacco in the charred bowl and applied a match. Thank God for nicotine! My thoughts flowed more clearly. Incredible or not, here I was, neither mad nor dreaming. Some quirk of circumstance had permitted Simpson to stagger from the web of illusion, but that quirk had evidently been one in a thousand. Jim and I might go wandering through alien depths until we died of hunger and exhaustion.

I OPENED my eyes. The gray clarity of space—a clarity of subtle indirection—still hemmed me in. Somewhere within a few feet of where I stood—as distance is computed in a three-dimensional world—Jim must be walking or standing. But this space was not three-dimensional. It was a weird dimension from outside the solar system which the mind of man could never hope to understand or grasp. And it was terrifying to reflect that within its depths Jim and I might be separated by thousands of miles and yet be cheek by jowl.

I walked on. I could not stand still for ever. God, I thought, there must be a way out of this horrible place, there must be! Ever and anon I called Jim's name. After a while I glanced at my watch, but it had ceased to run. Every muscle in my body began to ache, and thirst was adding its tortures to those of the mind. "Jim!" I cried hoarsely, again and again, but silence pressed in on me until I felt like screaming.

Conceive of it if you can. Though I walked on matter firm enough to the feet, seemingly space stretched below as well as above. Sometimes I had the illusion of being inverted, of walking head-downward. There was an uncanny sensation of being translated from spot to spot without the need of intermediate action. God! I prayed inwardly, God! I sank to my knees, pressing my hands over my eyes. But of what use was that? Of what use was anything? I staggered to my feet, fighting the deadly fear gnawing at my heart, and forced myself to walk slowly, without haste, counting the steps, one, two, three. . . .

When it was I first noticed the shimmering radiation, I can not say. Like heat radiation it was, only more subtle, like waves of heat rising from an open furnace. I rubbed my eyes, I stared tensely. Yes, waves of energy were being diffused from some invisible source. Far off in the illimitable depths of space I saw them pulsing; but I soon perceived that I was fated—like a satellite fixed in its groove—to travel in a vast circle of which they were the center.

And perhaps in that direction lay the door!

Filled with despair I again sank to my knees, and kneeling I thought drearily, "This is the end, there is no way out," and calmer than I had been for hours—there *is* a calmness of despair, a fatalistic giving over of struggle—I raised my head and looked apathetically around.

Strange, strange; weird and strange. Could this be real, was I myself? Could an immensity of nothing lie within a thirty-foot radius, be caused by something out of space, something brought by the meteor, something able to distort, warp?

Distort, warp!

With an oath of dawning comprehension I leapt to my feet and glared at the shimmering radiation. Why couldn't I approach it? What strange and invisible force forbade? Was it because the source of this incredible space lay lurking there? Oh, I was mad, I tell you, a little insane, yet withal possessed of a certain coolness and clarity of thought. I drew the heavy pistol from its holster. A phrase of Jim's kept running through my head: Vibration, vibration, everything is varying rates of vibration. Yet for a moment I hesitated. Besides myself, in this incredible space two others were lost, and what if I were to shoot either of them? Better that, I told myself, than to perish without a struggle.

I raised the pistol. The shimmering radiation was something deadly, inimical, the diffusing waves of energy were loathsome tentacles reaching out to slay.

"Damn you," I muttered, "take that —and that!"

I pulled the trigger.

OF WHAT followed I possess but a kaleidoscopic and chaotic memory. The gray void seemed to breathe in and out. Alternately I saw space and room, room and space; and leering at me through the interstices of this bewildering change something indescribably loathsome, something that lurked at the center of a crystal ball my shots had perforated. Through the bullet-holes in this crystal a slow vapor oozed, and as it oozed, the creature

inside of the ball struggled and writhed; and as it struggled I had the illusion of being lifted in and out, in and out; into the room, out into empty space. Then suddenly the crystal ball shivered and broke; I heard it break with a tinkling as of glass; the luminous vapor escaped in a swirl, the gray void vanished, and sick and giddy I found myself definitely encompassed by the walls of a room and within a yard of the writhing monstrosity.

As I stood with rooted feet, too dazed to move, the monstrosity reared. I saw it now in all its hideousness. A spidery thing it was, and yet not a spider. Up it reared, up, four feet in the air, its saucer-like eyes goggling out at me, its hairy paws reaching. Sick with terror, I was swept forward into the embrace of the loathsome creature. Then happened that which I can never forget till my dying day, so strange it was, so weird. Imagination, you say, the fantastic thoughts of a temporarily disordered mind. Perhaps, perhaps; but suddenly I seemed to know—know beyond a doubt—that this spider-like visitant from outer space was an intelligent, reasoning being. Those eyes—they seemed to bore into the innermost recesses of my brain, seemed to establish a species of communication between myself and the intelligence back of them. It was not a malignant intelligence—I realized that—but in comparison to myself something god-like, remote. And yet it was a mortal intelligence. My bullets had shattered its protective covering, had reached to its vulnerable body, and as it held me to itself, it was in the very throes of dissolution. All this I sensed, all this it told me; not through language, but through some subtle process of picture transference which it is hopeless for me to attempt to explain. I seemed to see a gray, weird place where delicate traceries were spun and silver devices shimmered and shone,—the habitat of the strange visitant from outer space. Perhaps the receiving-cells of my brain were not developed enough to receive all the impressions it tried to convey.

Nothing was clear, distinct, nothing definite. I had the agonizing consciousness that much was slipping through my brain, uncorrelated, unregistered. But a meteoroid was hurtling through the blackness of space—and I saw that meteoroid. I saw it falling to earth. I saw a portion of it swing clear, crash through the roof of Simpson's house and lodge in the bedroom. And I saw the strange visitant from outside our universe utilize the incredible power he possessed to distort space, iron out the kinks of matter in it, veil himself in immensity while studying his alien surroundings.

And then all his expiring emotions seemed to rush over me in a flood and I *felt*—*felt*—what he was thinking. He had made a journey from one star system to another, he had landed safely on earth, a trillion, trillion light-years distant, but never would he return to his own planet to tell of his success—never, never! All this I seemed to understand, to grasp, in a split second or so, his loneliness and pain, his terrible nostalgia; then the hairy paws relaxed their grip, the hideous body collapsed in on itself, and as I stared at it sprawling on the floor, I was suddenly conscious of Mrs. Simpson crouching, unharmed, in one corner of the room, of Jim standing beside me, clutching my arm.

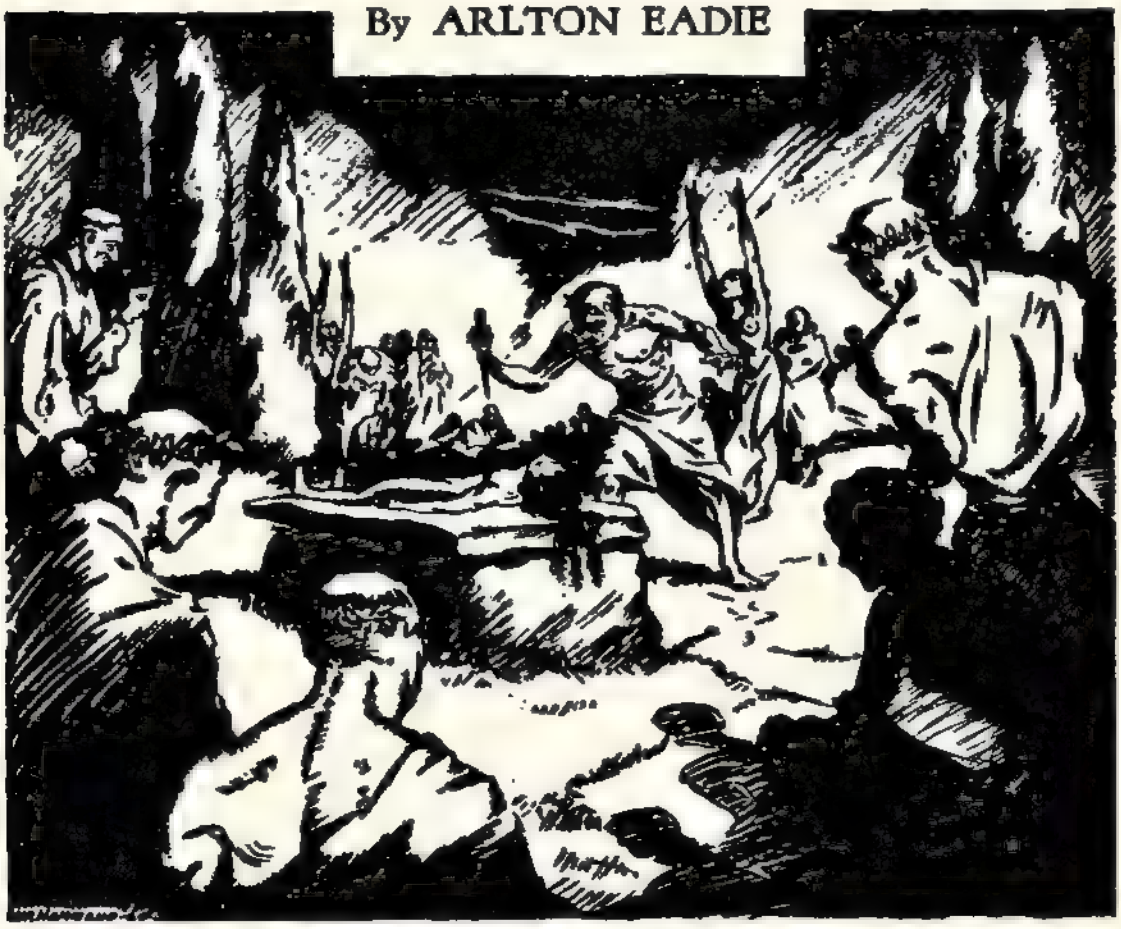
"Bill," he said hoarsely, "are you hurt?" And then in a whisper, "What is it? What is it?"

"I don't know," I returned chokingly, "I don't know. But whatever it is, it is dead now—the Distortion out of Space."

And unaccountably I buried my face in my hands and began to weep.

The Trail of the Cloven Hoof

By ARLTON EADIE



"White-robed Druids had enacted their solemn mysteries there."

A startling weird mystery story, of strange deaths on the desolate Moor of Exham, and the mysterious creature known as "The Terror of the Moor"

The Story Thus Far

OVERTAKEN by a night mist while on a tramping vacation on Exmoor, Hugh Trenchard, a young doctor, discovers an old recluse, Silas Marle, who had been rendered unconscious by the attack of a mysterious being which he describes as "The Terror of the Moor."

An examination of the scene of the attack reveals a trail of footprints which have evidently been made by cloven hoofs. Hugh seeks help at a sinister-looking private sanatorium, where he meets the owner, Professor Lucien Felger,

a weird figure whose features are concealed by a gauze antiseptic mask. Felger tries to prevent Hugh phoning the Exford police, but he gets the message through by a stratagem and makes his escape.

Sergeant Jopling, a not over-intelligent member of the county constabulary, duly arrives, bringing with him at Marle's request two local doctors and a solicitor. Jopling admits that he is puzzled by the attack on Marle, the more so because the old man's wife had been killed, just over a year since, in the same mysterious manner; in her case, however, death was attributed to the attack of one of the stags which roam the moor.

One of the local doctors, Ronnie Brewster, happens to be a former fellow-student of Hugh's, and as the two are seated together the following evening, they are amazed by the arrival of a beautiful girl, seemingly half dead with cold and fatigue. She recovers consciousness with suspicious suddenness the moment she is alone with Hugh. In hurried whispers she tells him that her name is Joan Endean, and gives him a sealed packet, asking him to keep it until she claims it.

Later that night he taxes her with fooling him and demands to know the truth. He can scarcely believe his ears when she tells him that she has escaped from the sanatorium—which is really a mental hospital—that he visited the previous day. But he is so convinced of her perfect sanity that on the arrival of Dawker, the giant gatekeeper of the "Sanatorium," he refuses to give her up. But Felger has already notified the police, and Sergeant Jopling insists on searching the house, only to find that Joan has disappeared. But lying on the bed upstairs is the body of Silas Marle, stabbed to the heart with a dagger whose silver hilt is shaped like a cloven foot.

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It was Dawker's hour of triumph, and for the fifth time he was emphasizing to Sergeant Jopling the fact that the murder would not have been committed if he had not been hindered in the execution of his duty by Hugh Trenchard and his friend.

"I told 'em she was a homicidal lunatic—told 'em again and again—and they swore black and blue that they hadn't clapped eyes on such a person. And all the while——"

"Pardon me," Hugh interrupted at this stage, addressing the police officer. "I fear that Mr. Dawker is letting his zeal outrun the inherent love of truth which I am sure he possesses in his calmer moments. If he will carry his mind back, he will remember that all I did was to deny having a person of unsound mind on the premises. And that statement was the exact truth. As a medical man I can assure you that Miss Endean is as sane as you or I."

A mocking smile spread over the coarse features of the asylum attendant as he jerked his thumb toward the stained dagger which lay upon a sheet of newspapers on the table.

"Ho, yus!—looks like it, don't it?" he jeered. "Why, she did it with the very dagger that she pinched from Doctor Felger's study at the sanatorium, and——" He stopped abruptly like a man who realizes he has said too much.

"I must ask you to make a note of that fact, sergeant," Hugh said swiftly. "It may be an important clue to the real murderer." Then he turned to Dawker. "Go on, my man, tell us the rest of the story. You said that the dagger was in Professor

Felger's possession; that he usually kept it in his study, and you were about to add something else when, for reasons best known to yourself, you suddenly stopped. Come, now, out with it. What were you about to say?"

Dawker ceased biting his lips, and his face twisted into something which was intended to be an innocent smile.

"Lord love yer! There ain't no call to jump down a fellow's throat just because he happens to make a slip of the tongue. I meant to say that the dagger *was* in Doctor Felger's study until a few days ago. That is," he corrected, with a malicious glance at Hugh, "we missed it soon after you called yesterday."

Hugh turned to the policeman with a laugh.

"Our friend here seems very hazy about his dates, but I suppose he means to infer that *I* am the suspected person. That rules out his former theory that Miss Endean committed the crime."

Jopling said nothing, but his expression indicated plainer than words that he was all at sea. It was Dawker who answered.

"The first thing to do is to find the girl and take her back," he cried impatiently. "While we're jawing here she'll get clear away."

"Then why jaw? Find her by all means, if you can, but"—Hugh's tanned face grew set and hard, and into his eyes there crept a look which made the attendant shrink back as though to ward off a blow—"at your peril I defy you to take her back to your so-called sanatorium. Whether she be innocent or guilty of this crime, the police are her proper custodians henceforth. And I would a thousand times sooner that she occupied a prison cell than be in the power of Professor Lucien Felger."

DAWKER and his fellows trooped out, followed shortly after by the two constables whom the sergeant had brought with him. But Jopling seemed to have no great faith in their chances of effecting an arrest.

"Like looking for a needle in a haystack," he grunted moodily as he returned to the living-room and seated himself in the chair which happened to be nearest the decanter. "It's a nasty night to be poking and ferreting about the moor. Rare cold, too, for the time o' year."

"Help yourself, sergeant," said Ronnie, fetching a clean glass and placing it beside him.

Jopling shook his head, but there was no heartiness in his action.

"It's agin' regulations, sir," he declared, his eyes fixed wistfully on the amber liquid. "But on such a night as this——"

"The regulations don't apply?" laughed Hugh. "I will absolve your conscience. As a medical man I hereby declare that your strength is exhausted, your nerves shaken, your circulation impaired, and I likewise declare that the only prescription that will meet the case is a stiff, man-sized bracer, to be taken immediately."

The patient dutifully complied with the orders of his medical adviser.

"Well, there's no going agin' you doctors!" he laughed. "Here's to your very good health, gentlemen, and may you both have plenty of rich incurables on your visiting-lists."

He drained his glass with undisguised relish, afterward wiping his heavy mustache with a red cotton handkerchief which he took from a pocket in the rear of his tunic. Replacing it, he produced a shiny black notebook and pencil stub from another mysterious recess in his uniform and assumed a judicial air.

"With all due respect to you, sirs, this is

likely to be a serious business," he declared solemnly. "Speaking for myself, and of course unofficially, I am willing to believe that you acted without malice aforethought, as the law terms it. But you must admit that you have harbored, sheltered, and otherwise comforted——"

"My friend did all the comforting that took place," Ronnie interposed, with a sly glance at Hugh.

"——harbored, sheltered, and otherwise comforted a dangerous lunatic," pursued Jopling, ignoring the interruption. "And in the course of the aforesaid harboring, sheltering, and otherwise comforting, the aforesaid dangerous lunatic has allegedly committed an alleged murder."

"Suppose we have a look at the alleged corpse," Ronnie suggested gravely.

"That's a good idea, sir. I was just about to make that suggestion when you took the words out of my mouth, so to speak."

He rose to his feet as he spoke, and the three men quitted the room; Jopling taking precedence by virtue of his official status, Hugh following, and Ronnie bringing up the rear. Ascending the cramped staircase, the police sergeant halted for a moment on the little landing, then turned the handle and slowly opened the door.

THE room might almost be termed an attic, for one half of the ceiling sloped at a steep angle, so that at the farther end of the room there were but a few inches of wall above the top of the long, low window. By daylight it might have appeared a light and cheerful apartment, for the window was composed of no less than six sections of latticed panes and occupied the greater part of one wall. But the dim light of the lamp invested it with a somber and mysterious gloom—a fit setting to the tragedy which had so recently been enacted there. The few pieces of furniture it contained had the appearance of being genuine antiques, the bed in particular being one of those imposing but unhygienic four-posted arrangements, elaborately carved and surmounted by a canopy of faded crimson silk, with the sides shrouded by curtains of the same material. It was an interesting relic of a bygone age, but Hugh was puzzled at the manner in which Jopling remained on the threshold of the room, staring at the bed with wide-open eyes.

"Some one's been up here since I came down," the policeman whispered at last. "I left those curtains open—but they're closed now!"

"It's a wild night," suggested Ronnie. "Perhaps the draft from that open window——"

"*Open* window?" Jopling whirled round as if he had been shot. "Why, the place must be haunted! I distinctly remember that every window was shut!"

"I suppose you made quite sure that Marle was dead?" said Hugh.

In spite of his bewilderment, Sergeant Jopling smiled.

"I'm not likely to be mistaken about *that*," he said emphatically. "I served in the R. A. M. C. during the war, and I reckon I know a stiff when I see one!" He stepped to the bed and laid his hand on the curtains. "But you're two doctors—have a look for yourselves——"

There was a low, eldritch sound as the rusty curtain-rings screeched back, followed by a shout of amazement from Jopling.

The bed was empty!

For a full minute the sergeant remained staring at the vacant bed as if he were testing the power of his concentrated gaze to bring back its vanished occupant. Then, without a word, he dashed to the open window and sent

forth three long, piercing blasts from his whistle.

"That'll bring my men back—and I feel as if I need 'em!" He took off his helmet and wiped his glistening forehead. "I have a mind that there's something or somebody fooling round this house that'll need a whole heap of catching. My men will be here in a minute. Meanwhile, let's search the place."

THE only fact which emerged from their rapid examination of the room was the indubitable fact that the corpse of Silas Marle was not in it. The other two constables had returned by this time, and Jopling, after ordering them to search the rest of the house, turned his attention to the open window of the bedroom. Leaning out as far as possible, he brought his hand-lamp into play, sending its beam downward through the darkness like a miniature searchlight. Presently he gave a grunt of satisfaction and withdrew his head.

"There's the sloping roof of a low outhouse immediately below, and there's a few smears of blood still remaining on the wet tiles," he informed Hugh and Ronnie. "That's the way the body was taken out, depend on it. But there was more than one person on the job—I'm sure of that! It would be quite possible for a powerful man to lift the corpse from the bed to the window, and let it slither down the sloping tiles to the ground, but it would need the strength of more than one to carry it far."

"So it would, sergeant," Ronnie agreed, adding thoughtfully, "unless that one man were as strong as a horse!"

"Or as swift as a deer!" said Hugh Trenchard.

The policeman made no reply, though he favored the speaker with a long, hard stare. With a gesture which was an unspoken invitation to the two to follow him, he descended the stairs and made his way outside to the rear of the house.

"Stay where you are, gentlemen," he warned when they had got within a few yards of the outhouse. "There may be footprints in this soft earth."

He switched on his lamp again and threw its light on the muddy path. Immediately an exclamation broke from him.

"By George! there *are* footprints! Look there—and there!"

Hugh stepped to his side and his eyes followed the white beam of the lamp as it jerked from one deep impression to the next. Something familiar in their outline caused him to catch his breath sharply.

"Look closer, sergeant," he said, "and tell me if you notice anything very peculiar in those footprints."

Jopling bent his burly form almost double.

"Well, come to think of it, there do look something mighty odd about 'em," he admitted. Then his roving beam fell upon one more distant than the rest, and his jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide. "Gosh!" he muttered. "If that's not the trail of a cloven foot I'll eat my helmet and swallow the badge!"

Hugh was unable to restrain a slight laugh at the man's almost comical air of mystification. It was a complete change of front from the cocksure manner in which he had ascribed the previous trail to "an old stag." Hugh felt tempted to indulge in a little gentle sarcasm.

"You seem rather surprized, sergeant. Have you forgotten that there are plenty of deer roaming about the moor? Is it so surprizing that one of the old stags should have paid us a visit?"

Sergeant Jopling slowly straightened himself and played the beam of his lamp

over the side of the outhouse and up the slope of the roof until it rested on the window of the room they had just quitted.

"Old stag?" he repeated, giving a twisted grin as he shook his head. "I'm thinking it's my words I have to eat instead of my helmet, Doctor Trenchard. A stag might have climbed up that woodpile, and up the roof; but it 'ud take a stag with a pair of human hands to open that window and haul out Silas Marle's body. Old stag be danged!—I'm thinking that we're up again' summat 'ere that needs a parson more than a policeman!"

8

HUGH TRENCHARD contrived to snatch a few hours' sleep that night, but at the first streak of dawn he was roused by a chorus of deep-throated barks, mingled with the cracking of whips. Throwing open the window, he saw a pack of hounds on the green in front of the house. With them were four horsemen and three other mounts whose saddles were at that moment empty. The sight took him by surprize, until he remembered Jopling's announced intention of sending for the Exmoor staghounds to follow up the trail which he had discovered in the combe immediately after the first murderous attack on Silas Marle.

"They will have a fresher trail to follow now," was the thought that flashed through his mind as he dressed and made a hasty toilet. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, there'll be queer sport afoot this morning!"

On descending to the living-room he found Sergeant Jopling in close consultation with a bluff-looking, middle-aged man in riding tweeds and top-boots.

"Come in, doctor," cried the policeman as Hugh hesitated. "This is the man I was talking to you about—Nick Froude, the harborer of the Exmoor staghounds. He's an old hand at the game, believe me, and what he doesn't know about stag-hunting isn't worth finding out."

It was soon apparent that the harborer had been informed of the latest developments of the case, for a slight smile passed across his weather-beaten face at the policeman's words.

"With all my experience, I've never come across anything exactly like this," he admitted, thoughtfully stroking the strip of gray side-whisker which ornamented his otherwise clean-shaven face. "Last night will make the third time that a stag has come to this house, and it's very unusual for them to approach human beings at all, although they might possibly charge any one who approached them during the rutting season. I'd like to have a look at those footprints before I bring the hounds to them."

"By all means do so," assented Jopling, and led the way to the rear of the house.

The harborer's keen eyes picked up the trail at once. Kneeling down, he examined each footmark in turn, measuring its length and breadth by the rough-and-ready expedient of comparing it with the fingers of his clenched hand.

"Yes, it's a stag, sure enough," he declared at length, "and a big 'un, or he would not have pushed his feet so far into the earth. You can always tell a stag's slot from a hind's, because a stag's hoof is rounder and wider at the heel, and blunter at the toes, and his dew-claws point outward, while a hind's are smaller and point inward. And there's a difference in the gait, too, for a stag crosses his legs right and left in walking."

"You're sure it was not another kind of animal altogether?" Jopling queried.

"What else could it be?" asked the harborer in his turn.

Sergeant Jopling shook his head.

"I dunno—I only wish I did," he returned with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "But I've never heard of a stag what climbs roofs and opens windows!"

Nick Froude laughed.

"You'll soon see what kind of a stag it is when my hounds force it to break cover," he declared confidentially. "I'll tell my men to put six couples of steady 'tufters' on the scent at once. I suppose you'll want to ride with us? I've brought over a couple of spare mounts."

Jopling hesitated, finally shaking his head.

"I've got my report to write out, and the superintendent is coming over from Bath, and may be here any minute." He turned to Hugh. "Maybe you and the other young doctor would care for a run?"

"Nothing would suit me better, and I think I can say the same of Doctor Brewster," said Trenchard eagerly. "All that we ask is ten minutes in which to snatch a mouthful of breakfast."

As he had anticipated, Ronnie proved as eager as himself to see the outcome of the strange adventure. Long before the ten minutes were up the two were standing by their horses, ready to take the saddle the moment Nick Froude gave the word.

THE sport of hunting the wild deer is, though shorn of much of its former pomp and ceremony, still carried on in much the same manner as when William of Normandy rode forth to the chase in his New Forest. First the "tufters" were separated from the rest of the pack and laid on the slot. They were old, experienced hounds and knew perfectly well what was expected of them. Each uttered a short bark as he picked up the scent, afterward running "mute." With tails in the air and noses to the ground, the dogs set off at a lopping trot, making almost due east in the direction of the high ground near the old Roman camp above Ashcombe.

"Mount, gentlemen!—it's a burning scent!" said Froude as he sprang into his own saddle. "Ride steady and do not press the hounds. The hunt doesn't really begin until the quarry is roused."

For over two miles the trail ran straight as an arrow over the gorse and heather. Suddenly the foremost tufter swerved off almost at right angles, followed by the rest. Froude swore under his breath.

"The varmint be up to his old games again. He intends to 'soil' like he did last time."

"Soil?" Hugh repeated with a puzzled shake of his head.

"Yes, sir. That's how we call it when a stag takes to the water and swims or wades up a stream to throw the hounds off the scent. Usually they only do it after they are properly roused—but this particular beast has the cunning of Satan himself. Look—what did I tell 'ee?"

Before them stretched a long rocky ravine, its sides covered with brushwood; at the bottom a silvery gleam of water showed here and there. Hugh viewed the precipitous sides with something like dismay.

"Surely you're not going down there?"

The harborer shook his head. "No horse could do it. But where a stag can lead a hound can follow. We'll let 'em bide for a bit and trust them to cast about on the farther side of the stream and pick up the scent again. Depend on it, sir, he won't travel along that stream far. There's a bog at the upper end, and a bridge a quarter of a mile down. I've never known a stag yet that passed over a bog or under a bridge. And by the same token, there's a road which leads down to the bridge. We'll get across so as to be on the right side if the stag should still be

harboring there; though I suppose he's a good many miles off yet."

They were half-way across the low stone bridge when a deep, bell-like note rose from the cover.

"That's the challenge—the sign that one of the hounds has picked up the scent. I'll wager it's old Whiteboy—I'd recognize his note in a thousand. He's the oldest tufter of the lot, but he's got the finest nose for a cold scent. Look! they've broke cover—but there's no stag in front of 'em."

He pointed with his whip to where the dogs had emerged from the wooded slope on the farther side of the ravine, their bodies half hidden in the tall heather. Setting spurs to their horses, the little cavalcade breasted the steep rise and again fell into position behind the hounds. The trail was taking a westerly direction. Their quarry was gradually circling back on its own tracks.

"Ah, he be making for water again," said Nick Froude, when Hugh commented on this change of direction. "That's an old trick of his. Other stags may put up a hind, so that its scent will confuse his own trail, or he may go to herd—mix with the others—for the same purpose. But this fellow always plays a lone hand. He's a cunning creature, and I'm minded he'll show us a trick or two before I sound his mort."

Hugh Trenchard nodded without speaking. In his own mind was an ever-increasing suspicion that the creature they were hunting would prove to be even stranger than the old harborer imagined.

PRESENTLY they found their progress barred by a broad stream, one of the tributaries of the River Exe. Without hesitation, the hounds plunged into the water, only to be at once recalled by the whipper-in.

"He's swum downstream," declared Froude.

"How can you tell that? Surely the scent does not lie on the water?" Hugh could not help exclaiming.

"No, but the hounds entered the water with their noses pointing downstream. The only danger is that the cunning brute may take that direction, come ashore for a minute or two, then swim in the reverse direction and break soil—land, that is—higher up than the place where he first entered the water; so that while we're wasting time on a false scent downstream, he's miles off in the other direction. But we'll cast downstream first, anyway."

The pack was divided, one half being sent to the farther bank in charge of the whipper-in; then both parties made their way in the same direction as the flowing current, the dogs nosing about in that eager yet crestfallen manner which they assume when at fault. More than half an hour passed thus, and Froude was thinking seriously of casting back, when old Whiteboy—in front as usual—lifted his head in the air and gave vent to the eager "challenge." Nick Froude urged his horse to the spot, his keen eyes searching the mud at the river bank.

"Hark forward!" he cried. "The slot is as plain as print, and not more than two hours old. It'll be a kill this time, gentlemen! Hark forward!"

A shrill blast from his horn brought the remainder of the dogs from the farther bank, and the chase was resumed. Another hour, and Hugh Trenchard began to be aware of a vague sense of familiarity in the changing face of the countryside. He looked again at the densely wooded slope of the tor they were approaching, asking himself when and where he had seen just such another. Just then the trail took a turn, and a second later he caught sight of a roof among

the trees, and the mystery was a mystery no longer. The cloven trail was heading straight toward the gates of Professor Lucien Felger's private sanatorium—the place from which Joan Endean had made her escape!

To the wild excitement of the chase was added another, even keener emotion. What could be the connection between the sinister cloven-footed monster, the self-styled King of the Moor, and the equally sinister scientist from Vienna? Was it mere chance that their quarry had, after twice endeavoring to cover its tracks, made for that spot? It would not seem so, he decided, for the pack was in full cry now, running without check or swerve, straight for the closed gate. A sudden sense of exultation filled Hugh Trenchard's heart—the next few minutes would prove whether the so-called Terror of the Moor had a real existence or was nothing but the figment of a disordered imagination. The gate was less than a hundred yards off now; Hugh pressed forward until he was the foremost rider. If the hounds were refused admittance, as was more than likely, he was determined to climb the gate and admit them with his own hands. The suave professor might be an adept at throwing dust in the eyes of human beings, but it would need some one cleverer than he to deceive the natural instincts of old Whiteboy and the pack.

But even as the thought crossed his mind there came an unexpected interruption. When little more than a dozen yards from the gate, each hound came to a sudden halt, snuffed the ground for a few seconds, then set off with renewed speed in a totally different direction.

Nick Froude drew rein, his bronzed face a picture of bewilderment.

"Are the hounds bewitched?" he cried. "If this were thick cover I'd say our quarry was lying close, having turned out another stag, for I'll swear they've gone off on a fresh scent — first time I've known old Whiteboy to do such a thing. Head 'em back, Jem!" he shouted to the whipper-in, then rode forward to the pack, endeavoring with voice and whip to make them return to the former trail. "Ho, Whiteboy! Romper! Teazer! Back, Whiteboy, back! Damn the dogs!—they *are* bewitched!"

But for once the well-trained animals were heedless of threats and coaxing alike. They were in full cry now, each hound giving tongue as loudly as his exertions would permit. They seemed frenzied — maddened. They could not have dashed forward more rapidly if their quarry had just broken cover and were standing "at gaze" before them. Realizing that his efforts to turn them were useless, Nick Froude fell in behind the pack.

"Let 'em bide, Jem," he directed the whipper-in. "This is the queerest run I've ever heard tell of."

Like an arrow aimed by a master-hand, the pack headed straight across the purple moor. Gradually they left the heather behind them and emerged on a plateau of naked rock. Here they suddenly stopped, barking loudly and struggling round their leader, who was frantically snuffling and pawing something that lay on the ground. A minute later Froude galloped up and threw himself from the saddle, cracking his long whip and trying to separate them. Seizing Whiteboy by the haunches—for no hound wears a collar—he dragged the dog off the thing he was trying to worry. It was a pocket-handkerchief which had once been white but now was soiled and torn.

"A handkerchief!" cried Hugh. "Now what on earth made——"

Silencing him with a gesture, Nick

stooped and sniffed the grimy rag. When he straightened up, the expression on his face told that he had encountered something that was beyond his experience of woodcraft.

"It seems as if our quarry has remarkable intelligence—or else he has a human ally who is not anxious for him to be sighted," he said slowly. "That handkerchief has been soaked in aniseed and deliberately drawn across the trail. Aniseed has the same effect on dogs as valerian has on cats—nothing can stop them making straight for it. No pack on earth would run true in the face of that drug, and if the joker who played the trick had not thrown the drug-soaked rag away, they would have followed him to the ends of the earth. But he was artful enough to drop his lure when he'd carried the false trail far enough. Anyway, gentlemen, that's the finish of today's sport. It would be sheer waste of time to hark back to where the hounds were at fault, for they'd only make for this spot again. I'll have to destroy the handkerchief before I'll be able to get them away."

He searched about until he found a small heap of dried heather. Placing the torn handkerchief on it, he drew out a matchbox.

"ONE moment, if you please."

Ronnie Brewster had dismounted and approached the miniature pyre. His manner was one of studied carelessness, but Hugh seemed to sense a note of suppressed excitement in his voice as he went on:

"I'm rather curious to know what aniseed smells like. Do you mind if I have a sniff before you send it up in smoke?"

"You're quite welcome, sir."

Ronnie knelt and bent over the grimy scrap of linen; then he smilingly beckoned to Hugh.

"Come and have a sniff, old bean—this stunt may come in very handy if you happen to be trailed by a man-eating bloodhound at any time."

Secretly wondering what lay beneath his chum's strange request, Trenchard knelt by his side. As he did so, Ronnie, with no perceptible movement of his lips, whispered rapidly.

"Look in the corner of the handkerchief!"

For a moment the young doctor paused uncomprehendingly. Then his eyes sought the indicated spot, and he stiffened as though at a sudden, numbing blow. Worked in tiny letters of silk were the initials J. E.—Joan Endean—the girl who had appeared from nowhere in that night of rain and storm, to disappear afterward as mysteriously. Was this yet another link connecting her with the Terror of the Moor?

"Curious smell, isn't it?" Ronnie's drawling voice roused him from the stupor of amazement into which the discovery had plunged him.

"Yes." Hugh paused, struggling to control his voice. "Very curious indeed."

Nick Froude struck a match and applied it to the litle heap. With a slight crackling sound, the flames licked up and encircled the scrap of cambric, and in a few seconds it was nothing but a shred of glowing tinder. Like a man in a dream he watched the harborer grind his foot on the still smoldering heap, leaving not the slightest spark that might start a heath-fire.

Looking up, he caught Ronnie regarding him curiously.

"Quite an impressive little ceremony, eh?" laughed his friend as they remounted. "Quite funereal—'ashes to ashes' . . . and all the rest of it."

Ashes to ashes! In spite of the warm sunshine, Hugh felt himself shivering.

Coming when they did, the symbolic words seemed like a warning—a portent of impending peril to the girl he had grown to love.

9

HUGH TRENCHARD'S mind was the prey of perplexing thoughts as he jogged along in the rear of the little cavalcade on their way back to apprise Sergeant Jopling of the amazing finish of the chase. The tragic and mysterious events of the past few days had followed one another so rapidly that he had not had time to grasp their full significance. From the even tenor of a quiet walking-tour he had found himself plunging into a real-life drama so full of weird and seemingly supernatural happenings that it might have had its setting in the Dark Ages, instead of the prosaic Twentieth Century. Now, as his wiry little pony ambled along the bridle path without needing a touch on the reins to guide it, he gave his mind up to an endeavor to consider each event in its proper order.

That old Silas Marle had made elaborate preparations to guard himself was not surprizing in view of the fact that his wife had met her death on the moor just over a year previously; the massive bolts on the doors and bars across the windows, to say nothing of the numerous weapons which the house contained, proved that he had taken precautions against such a fate overtaking himself. He had indeed admitted as much on recovering consciousness after Hugh had carried him to the house, and the old man's horror-stricken utterance had caused his words to be imprinted on Trenchard's brain with an exactitude which approached that with which the recording needle of a gramophone engraves its message on the waxen disk. "The Terror of the Moor!—the Terror that walks by night—the foul, cloven-hoofed shape that glides through the darkness, seeking whom it may destroy! . . . I swore that I would destroy it, but it has destroyed me instead." Wild and frenzied words, which the young doctor might have attributed to the ravings of delirium had it not been for his own experience that night—the demoniacal voice issuing from the mist and the unmistakable imprint of the cloven feet in the soft ground.

A supernatural monster? Hugh dismissed the thought the instant it came to him, but close behind it came the recollection of the passage in the ancient, black-letter volume in the library of Silas Marle. "*. . . ye Foule and Namelesse Thynge whyche, fearsome beyonde measure, hunteth ye Desolate Moore of ye Auncient Kyngdome of Wessex. It slayeth wythe Arte and Cunnynge beyonde very belief, nathless it leaveth ye Cloven Trayle of its Devyl's Foot wheresoever it walketh.*" With a start he called to mind the uncanny fact that it was just as he was reading of this weird monster's power of assuming the shape of "*a Maiden, ravishynge to the eye and fair withal, who knocketh on ye Casement, beseechynge entry,*" that he had heard the light tap which heralded the arrival of Joan Endean.

Hugh could not repress a smile as his thoughts reached this stage. The quaintly spelt adjectives of the long-dead necromantic author of the old book might not be a bad description of the personal charms of the girl who had emerged so opportunely from the storm-swept moor. But he could not reconcile the expression of her frank blue eyes with the attributes of a bloodthirsty monster of diabolic origin. Indeed, he was surprized at himself for allowing his mind to dwell on the subject with any degree of seriousness.

"This legend-infested moor must have inoculated me with some of its supernatural virus!" he thought, his lip curling in a smile of self-contempt. "I'd better be getting back to the saner atmosphere of London before I make a public confession of faith in vampires, hobgoblins, and Black Magic generally!"

But even as the thought of return presented itself to his mind he knew he had no intention of putting it into effect. He knew that he would never leave the neighborhood of the great sweeping moors until he, or somebody else, had solved the problem which at present baffled yet enthralled him with its eery mystery. In his character was a streak of dogged pugnacity which had often served him in good stead in the amateur boxing-ring, and now it asserted itself in no uncertain fashion. Come what might, he would see the matter through, and if the trail of the cloven foot led him to Joan Endean, so much the better. True, he recognized the possibility of his quest ending in something much more sinister and less desirable than the renewal of his acquaintance with the beautiful girl who had crossed his path under such exciting circumstances; but he accepted that possibility with a confident shrug. He would take lodgings somewhere in the immediate neighborhood and play a lone hand against the dreaded Terror of the Moor.

SERGEANT JOPLING met them on their return to Moor Lodge, and there seemed to be an undercurrent of excitement beneath the worthy officer's stolid exterior. He listened in silence while the harborer gave an account of the unexpected check which had brought the run to a premature end. A gleam of increased interest came into the sergeant's eyes when he heard the means that had been employed.

"Aniseed?" he repeated, busy with his ever-ready notebook. "Well, there doesn't seem to be anything supernatural about a thing you can buy at any chemist's shop. Now if it had been a whiff of brimstone——"

Hugh felt secretly amused at the eloquent manner in which the sergeant left the rest of the sentence unspoken.

"I should imagine that one could just as easily procure brimstone as aniseed," he remarked. "But at least the employment of such means seems to indicate that whatever you're after is substantial enough to wear a pair of regulation handcuffs—when you catch him."

Sergeant Jopling slowly closed one eye in an elaborate wink.

"Maybe when that time comes we may find it isn't a 'him' at all," he said in a whisper that was intended for Hugh's ears alone. "It might possibly be a 'her'!"

Hugh Trenchard regarded the man with quickened interest. Plainer than words, his manner indicated that he had got a clue.

"Any fresh developments, sergeant?" he asked in the same low tone.

"Maybe — maybe not," was the noncommittal rejoinder. "Will you step into the next room for a moment?"

When they were alone the sergeant slowly and impressively drew a letter from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"This was delivered while you were away, sir. It's addressed to *Hugh Trenchard, M. D.*, and the writing betrays feminine characteristics, as the saying is. Would it be a delicate question if I were to ask you if there is any lady of your acquaintance that is likely to be writing to you here?"

Hugh could only shake his head. His circle of friends was a small one, and none of them, he felt positive, knew of

his present whereabouts, unless — he started and his heart gave a quick throb as the thought flashed to his mind—it was the mysterious Joan Endean. He felt the flush rise to his cheeks, and cursed as he saw a look of suspicious comprehension light up Jopling's dull features.

"Why, any one would think you were about to charge me with stealing somebody's affections!" he said, forcing a light laugh. "If you intend to arrest every young man who is the recipient of an epistle in feminine handwriting, you'll have to enlarge your village lock-up to the dimensions of a county jail! I presume the letter came by post?" he added, struck by a sudden thought.

Sergeant Jopling slowly shook his head. "If it had I shouldn't be questioning you now, sir."

"Was it delivered by a messenger?"

"Not so far as I know," said the policeman, with another shake of his head.

"Then how on earth did it get here?" cried the now thoroughly bewildered Trenchard.

"Ah, that's the very question that I'd like to be able to answer." With exasperating deliberation, Jopling insinuated his bulky form into an inadequate-looking armchair and crossed one leg over the other. Again his eyes roamed toward the ceiling as though he were seeking inspiration from the age-blackened beams. When at length he spoke, his first remark seemed more in an autobiographical than an explanatory vein: "I happened to go up to Lunnon once, on a matter of identification, and having a few hours to spare before my train left, I strolled into one of the theaters. I forget the name of the piece that was being played, but one of the scenes were an old, lonely house—just such another as this 'ere house we're in at this moment. I don't remember much of the plot—if there was a plot—but I *do* mind that every time the villain came on—he wasn't a villain at all, as it turned out at the end, but some one who was trying to catch the real villain, who was a detective — I hope you catch my meaning, sir?"

"Oh, quite. I've seen plays something like that myself," said Hugh wearily. "Please go on."

"Well, as I were a-saying, this villain-who-wasn't-the-villain-at-all seemed never to dream of entering the room like an ordinary Christian, through the door. He'd pop in through the window at the most unexpected moments, or through the ceiling, or the floor, or a secret panel in the wainscot; once he came through an old grandfather clock, though how he managed it without being mixed up with the works is a thing I've never understood from that day to this! I remember thinking at the time how puzzling it would be to us policemen if things like that happened in real life, which same I was quite sure at that time they did not. And I was quite sure, sir, up to no later than yesterday. But now—well, *now* I ain't quite so sure!"

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you." There was no pretense about Hugh's puzzled air. "What do you mean?"

Sergeant Jopling jerked his head toward the letter, which still lay unopened on the table.

"I mean the way that letter came to be delivered 'ere. It were something like half an hour arter you had all rode away with the hounds. I was sitting on this window-seat, trying to straighten matters out in my mind and making a few entries in my notebook. One o' my men, P. C. Whimple—a good lad, though he *is* too fond of reading those detective stories—was out by the front garden gate, looking for cigarette-ends and what-not among the grass. Another, Hardy, an

experienced officer (between you and me, he's next for promotion when I retire) was at the back taking plaster-of-Paris casts of the cloven footprints. My third man was on the roof lowering a bag of sand down the chimney to see it it was wide enough for a body to pass through. Please to bear in mind those positions—me in here, Wimple at the gate, Hardy at the back door, the other man on the roof. You'd say it was impossible for any one to enter the house without one of us spotting him, wouldn't you? Well, some one *did* enter it, for when I finished my notes and came out to tell Wimple not to waste his time scratching about like an old hen, the first thing that caught my eye was this letter lying on the hall-stand!"

"It's certainly very curious," Hugh admitted.

Apparently the sergeant considered the adjective inadequate.

"Curious?" he repeated with a grunt of contempt. "To my mind it's a jolly sight more curiouser than merely 'curious'! I've heard of messages being sent through the air by wireless, but it's the first time I've heard of 'em being delivered all written out, sealed, and addressed! Why, a dog couldn't have entered the house without one of us seeing it—much less a man! I'm thinking there be a secret passage or two about this old place, and that's the way old Marle's body were spirited away."

"And where do you imagine this wonderful secret passage leads to?" Hugh inquired with a slight smile.

Jopling waved his hand vaguely.

"Out on the moor—anywhere—maybe only a few hundred feet outside the walls," he replied, eyeing the ancient paneling with a resentful scowl. "I've been tapping the woodwork down here and in the bedroom all the afternoon, but it all seems hollow alike to me."

"You ought to confine your investigations to looking for the hidden spring—all the best fiction insists on a hidden spring being present on these occasions," said Hugh gravely. "While you are searching for it, I'll read my letter, if you have no objections."

"Certainly, sir—by all means." The policeman gave a tentative cough. "Maybe the contents will be interesting."

His meaning was unmistakable; but Hugh had no intention of taking the somewhat obtuse hint.

"I have no doubt that they will be—to me."

HUGH took up the letter as he uttered the dry rejoinder. In spite of his assumed nonchalance he found his fingers trembling with eagerness as he slit the envelope and extracted a dainty sheet of notepaper. Long before his eyes had scanned the signature, his intuition told him that the missive was from his mysterious visitor of the previous night. It ran:

Dear Doctor Trenchard,

When I gave the sealed packet into your keeping I little thought that I should want to claim it so soon, but unforeseen circumstances have made it necessary for me to have it without delay. Meet me at the Devil's Cheesepress, in the Valley of Rocks, near Lynton, bringing the packet with you. I shall be waiting there between eleven o'clock and midnight. Please do not fail me.

JOAN ENDEAN.

Jopling was searching his face with curious eyes. "Anything of interest?" he asked after a long expectant pause.

"Yes—but only of interest to myself."

"It has no bearing on the disappearance of Marle's body?" the other persisted.

"Not the slightest bearing."

Hugh Trenchard made the statement quite believing it to be true. It seemed little short of sacrilege to regard that frank-eyed girl as an integral part of the

dark mystery which hung over the lonely house on the moor. He was like a man who walks beneath a magnificent star-sown sky, admiring the splendor of the heavens, his upturned eyes unheeding the chasm which yawns beneath his feet.

He thrust the letter into his pocket, nodded to the sergeant, and hurried from the room. The little coast town of Lynton was some fifteen miles distant, and the Valley of Rocks beyond that again. A glance at his map told him that there was no railway that would serve his purpose. He would have to trust to luck to get some kind of conveyance from one of the villages; failing that, he would have to tramp the whole distance. In the end he did tramp it, and it was a very weary Hugh Trenchard who breasted the summit of Shilstone Hill and saw the lights of Lynton shine forth one by one against the dusk-dimmed waters of the Severn Sea.

10

THE twin villages of Lynton and Lynmouth doze like two drowsy sentinels over the twin mouths of the River Lyn. It is quite possible to throw a stone from one village to the other, though the experiment is not recommended, as the missile hurled from Lynton might gain a dangerous momentum in dropping the six hundred feet which represents the difference of altitude between the two villages; for Lynton crowns the brow of a lofty hill while Lynmouth nestles in the valley beneath.

A church clock was ponderously announcing the hour of ten as Hugh Trenchard made his way along the Lynbridge Road, and, confident that he had plenty of time in which to cover the remaining couple of miles, he turned his steps seaward, emerging on the cliff overlooking the spot where the united waters of the East and West Lyns form a tiny tidal harbor, sheltered on the west by a breakwater with a lighthouse in the form of a mediæval-looking tower, machicolated and weather-scarred, and bearing a curious resemblance to the structures which crown the heights on the banks of the Rhine. Stretching his weary limbs on the grass, Hugh lit his pipe and prepared for a quiet hour. He had no wish to attract attention by arriving at his destination before the appointed time.

Although it was still the tail-end of the holiday season, the place seemed almost deserted. Beyond the lighted windows of the single row of houses fronting the harbor, the waters of the broad estuary stretched dark and mysterious to where the faint flash of the Mumbles Light marked the coast of Wales. Nearer at hand were the white and green lights of a tramp steamer hugging the coast on its way to Bristol or Cardiff. Hugh had slowly smoked one pipe, and was in the act of lighting a second when he was conscious of a burly figure coming along the edge of the cliff.

"Voine night, zur."

The greeting was uttered in the broadest Somerset dialect, and Hugh, straining his eyes to pierce the gloom, saw that the speaker was attired in a peaked cap and rough pilot-jacket. Although his appearance was distinctly nautical, he looked slightly different from the usual fisherman or longshoreman.

"It is indeed a fine night," Hugh agreed, "though it blows a trifle chilly up here."

The man nodded his head sagely as he cocked a weatherwise eye toward the clouds.

"Thicky wind's blawin vrom the zea. It'll bring rain afore morn, I wadger."

"I hope not," laughed Hugh. "We've had enough wet these last few days to last

us a long time. These Exmoor showers are no joke—they wet you through in five minutes."

"Aye vor sure, it do rain cats and dogs zumtoimes," the old man assented. "I mind my varther a-telling me that volks used to wear stagskin suits afore they mackintoshes were invented."

Hugh Trenchard was conscious of a suddenly awakened interest.

"Stagskin suits?" he repeated.

"Aye, zur, suits made out of the hides of stags, tanned o' course, and worn wi' the hair outstanding. It were Doctor Wade, of Dulverton, who first thought of the idee. He had a suit made like a pair of overalls, with a large overhanging cape and a hood for his head—just like one o' the old monks—with holes left for the eyes and to breathe through. On the day that Sir Thomas Acland were nominated as the Conservative candidate, the doctor wore it when he rode down to Exeter to support him. Eh! but what laughing and joking he caused. All the gentle-volk were a-calling him 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'The Wild Man o' the Woods' and zuch-loike, but doctor he didn't moind a scrap. It were raining cats and dogs that day, zur, an' every one o' 'em were drenched to the skin, bar him. Cooming home he were riding through Raddlecombe just as the 'Royal Oak' were a-turning out their customers at closing-time. No sooner did the lads zee what were riding at 'em afore they lets out a screech that could be heard t'other end o' Zummerzet a'most, and then every man-jack of 'em skedaddled for their lives. They thought the Phantom Hunter had coom for 'em, I wadger!"

Hugh removed his pipe from his mouth and glanced sharply up.

"The Phantom Hunter?" he repeated, striving to conceal the eager note that crept into his voice. "What on earth is that?"

The ancient mariner regarded him with a kind of pitying amazement during the pause which followed.

"Lord sakes! do 'ee mean to say 'ee never heerd o' the ghostly horseman that rides with his ghostly pack over Exmoor?"

Trenchard shook his head, repressing the smile which at first threatened to betray his incredulity. Like a flash his mind had recalled the staggering events of the past few days—events which so far had defied a rational explanation. Though far from willing to credit the moor with possessing a supernatural visitant, he was nevertheless surprized to learn of the existence of a definite local legend to that effect. It at least seemed to indicate that Silas Marle was not alone in his belief that the Moor was haunted.

"I have heard a rumor to that effect," he admitted warily. "But tell me more about this Phantom Hunter. What does he look like?"

DELIGHTED at finding such an interested listener, the old man seated himself on the turf beside Hugh, and, having filled his clay pipe from the proffered pouch, plunged into his tale with relish.

"What do 'e look like, sez you? Well, mister, that theer be a hard question to answer, surely — some volks say one thing, some volks zay contrarywise. According to some 'e be dressed like the huntsmen of the days gone by, with a plumed hat and high buff boots, mounted on a gurt black horse, bewhiles a-blowing of his hunting-horn and halloing to his hounds as he follows the Phantom Herd."

"Herd of what?" questioned Hugh. "Deer?"

The old man nodded as he sucked reflectively at his pipe.

"Deer, to be sure," he assented. "Many a varmer on Exmoor—aye, and on Dartmoor, too—will tell 'ee how he has laid awake at night a-listening to the baying of the Wild Huntsman's hounds as the chase swept past his cottage. They do zay it all began over a witch's curse, years and years agone, mister, and I've often heerd my old varther repeat the rime that some poet-vellow made up about it."

"Do you think you could remember it?" Hugh asked the question with an interest that was not wholly due to the possible bearing which the old legend might have on the recent puzzling events. He knew that the oldest traditions of folklore were often cast into verse, so as to be more easily remembered and passed on orally from father to son through the ages when the bulk of the common people were illiterate.

"Aw, iss, vor sure I remember it," the old man answered, and in a quavering singsong treble he repeated a doggerel legend which, judging by its archaic phraseology and barbaric meter, must have originated about the time of Chaucer.

Lord Tybault of Haddon, a huntsman he,
Deep-skilled in the Art of Venerie,
Handsome and proud as a hart in the glen,
Beloved by maidens and envied by men.
He laughed at Love's shackles—his love it was free,
And freest of all that for Sweet Marjorie,
Dame Elspeth's daughter—she who, 'twas said,
Was learned in witchcraft, art deep and dread.
But Marjorie spurned him, laughed long and loud
At the tenderest vows of Lord Tybault the proud:
"Go, seek other hunting—you're riding at fault!
"This heart will elude you, my proud Lord Tybault!"
But he carried her off in the dead of the night,
And she in the greenwood bewailed her sad plight.
About her white throat a kerchief she tied,
And Lord Tybault had a corpse for his bride.
The aged witch-mother, she wept and she swore
By the Powers of Darkness she'd plague him full sore.
As the bell tolled out midnight she cast a dread spell,
Written in blood and recorded in Hell.
When forth next morn rode proud Lord Tybault,
His palfrey was lame, his hounds were at fault;
The bolts from his crossbow flew wide of the mark;
The stags in the glen, the hinds in the park
Went alike scatheless, and never a mort
Sounded that day to enliven his sport.
The hottest of scents, the plainest of slot,
His fiend-ridden hounds e'er overshot.
Anon, rousing himself, he cried, "Hark away!
"I'll kill if I ride till the Judgment Day!"
The hounds quested back in the depths of the wood,
With snuffle and traverse, thirsting for blood;
A hart bounding out, they hot on his spoor—
Lord Tybault in chase dashed over the moor.
Away went the quarry, away went the hounds,
"Hark away! Forward!" the hunting-horn sounds.
He rose in his stirrups and swore, "By the Rood!
"Ne'er will I dismount till I have drawn blood!
"Up hill and down dale, o'er forest and combe,
"I'll harry that stag till the last crack of Doom!"
Up hill and down dale, through heather and brake,
The hart took its way, with him in its wake.
The sun sank down in a sea of red flame,
But hunted and hunter sped on just the same.
His vow had been heard by the God he defied—
Condemned was Lord Tybault for ever to ride.
And through Summer's fair day and the dull Winter gloom,
Lord Tybault must ride till the last Day of Doom.

"H'm—very interesting," Hugh commented when the old fellow came to the end. "Allow me to congratulate you on your excellent memory."

"I knows heaps more, zur. I'll tell 'ee the one about the ghost that used to haunt the trading-ketch that plied atween Minehead and Waterford——"

"I'm afraid it will have to be some other time," said Hugh as he rose to his feet. "It's getting late, and I shall have to be going."

"Right ye are, zur. Any time ye be passing this ways, just ask any one for Zacary Durdon's cottage. I'll allers be glad to have another crack wi' 'ee. Good-night, zur, good-night."

The old man touched his forehead and hobbled off in the direction of the village. Hugh Trenchard swung off in the opposite direction, entering the North Walk, a mile-long terrace hewn midway

down the face of the cliff, a mere ledge five feet wide and four hundred feet above the surface of the sea.

It seemed as if Zacary Durdon's prediction were correct, for as Hugh walked onward, the ragged rain-clouds began to drive in from the Atlantic, and, scudding across the face of the rising moon, sent their crawling shadows over the heaving sea and the jagged wilderness of peaks which presently opened out before him. By the fleeting moonbeams he was able to take his bearings. That stupendous mass of stone, its summit reared some eight hundred feet above the waves which frothed against its foot, was the Castle Rock; the more regularly outlined pyramid of cyclopean dimensions could be none other than the hill called Ragged Jack. Almost opposite, on the inland side, where the Valley of Rocks took a sudden turn, was a fantastic, isolated mass of granite jutting from the slope of the hill. It was the Devil's Cheesepress, the spot where he was to meet Joan Endean.

Trenchard slackened pace as he sighted his destination. A glance at the illuminated dial of his watch told him that he had a good twenty minutes to spare before the appointed hour. He knocked the ashes from his pipe, felt to make sure that the precious letter reposed in his pocket, then began to pick his way across the floor of the valley to the lonely, upstanding rock.

He fell into a curious train of thought as he slowly advanced. The scene around him had probably remained unchanged since the eyes of the first man had beheld it. What a story that solitary crag could tell were it endowed with speech! In its shadow, low-browed savages had patiently chipped their rude flint axes and smiting-stones. If antiquaries were right in their interpretation of the rough circle of surrounding stones, white-robed Druids had enacted their solemn mysteries there. Against the lichen-draped surface of that hoary pile the war trumpets of Cæsar's legions might have echoed. Its time-scarred face had felt the same breezes that had swelled the painted sails of the ships which brought the Danish rovers and the mail-clad Norman knights. Elsewhere, the face of England had changed with the passing centuries—here the very heart of Time seemed frozen and dead. That stark, nature-hewn monolith was like an everlasting link connecting the present with the past.

Five minutes of leisurely walking brought him to the irregular path which sloped up to the rock. His heart was beating a little faster than usual as he started to mount. Try as he might, he could not repress a creepy feeling as, alone amid the prehistoric stony wilderness, he awaited the hour that would herald the birth of another day to add to the vast toll of days that were past and dead.

Suddenly he halted and stood stock-still, listening. In that world of silence he had caught the sound of a footstep—not such a sound as a shod human foot would make, but light, soft, almost inaudible, like the padding of some prowling beast. Surely, he thought, the girl would have recognized him as he had crossed the open; it could not be she who was approaching with such sinister stealth!

He shifted his gaze to the patch of shadow cast by the Devil's Cheesepress, examining a portion which seemed to have changed its position without apparent cause. But before he could make sure that his fancy had not deceived him, a cloud drifted before the moon, and all was dark. Moving forward quickly, his outstretched hand came in contact with

the rough surface of the rock. Guiding himself by touch, he began to creep round the shoulder which separated him from the suspicious object.

The moonlight flickered, waned, then shone through a rift in the moving clouds. The dim, wavering beams were not bright enough to illuminate the recesses of the rock-girt gloom, yet they were sufficiently so to reveal something which made him catch his breath sharply and feel for the butt of his revolver.

Two greenly luminous eyes were looking into his own!

It was not the cold malignity of that fixed, unwinking stare that made Hugh Trenchard's heart feel as if it were being squeezed by a hand of ice, neither was it the half-bestial, half-human character of the eyes themselves. It was the remembrance that the last time he had seen them was when they watched his approach through the window of Professor Felger's so-called sanatorium. In a flash he remembered, too, that Joan Endean's handwriting was unknown to him—the letter which had been delivered in such a mysterious fashion might well be a forgery designed to lure him, with the precious sealed packet, to that lonely spot. Like a fool he had walked into a trap!

He turned to fly—a fraction of a second too late. Even as he whirled round, he was conscious of the whistle of a slung-shot through the air—a crashing blow which made the scene dissolve into a thousand dancing stars—an ocean of blackness rushing up to engulf him, and, as he sank into what seemed death, the purring laugh of triumph of Professor Lucien Felger.

11

WHEN the first glimmer of returning consciousness trickled into Hugh Trenchard's brain he was at first uncertain whether a minute, an hour, or many hours had elapsed. All that his bewildered brain could grasp was that he had a splitting headache. The rest was chaos.

It was a long time before he began slowly, almost subconsciously, to piece together the events of the night. He had gone somewhere to meet somebody, but where and whom he had but the foggiest notion. Yet all the while his disjointed thoughts kept circling round two words, like dancing moths round a candle. Those words were "The Devil." At one time he caught himself gravely reviewing the possibility of his having received a week-end invitation from His Sulfurous Majesty, and only rejecting the theory on account of the inconsistency of the atmospheric conditions. For a pleasantly cool wind was fanning his throbbing forehead as he was being borne swiftly and smoothly through the night air. But his ideas were jumbled and confused, as if—the simile came without conscious effort—his brain had been squeezed in a gigantic cheesepress.

Cheesepress! The absurd word was like a magic key. The Devil's Cheesepress—the forged assignation—the sealed letter. . . .

The memory of Joan Endean's trust was like a douche of cold water. What of the sealed letter? His hand fumbled in his inner pocket, and he knew the answer, and groaned. The letter was gone!

Without altering his position, he opened his eyes, to discover that he was huddled on the cushioned seat of a large car. Darkness hemmed him in on every side, save where the headlights revealed a section of the rough moorland track ahead. Was he a prisoner? Hugh slewed his eyes to his right and saw the dim profile of a man seated by his side. He seemed to be a youngish fellow, clean-shaven; but little more could be discerned by rea-

son of his upturned coat collar and down-turned hat brim. Another, burlier figure sat on Hugh's left hand, and this one seemed to be dressed in some sort of uniform adorned with metal buttons.

"That will be the amiable Dawker!" Hugh thought grimly. "I wonder if the other fellow is Professor Felger minus his highly convenient antiseptic mask?"

Hugh closed his eyes and did some rapid thinking. Out of the queer jumble of the events of the past few hours three facts appeared to stand out clearly. The sealed packet had been stolen—he was a prisoner in the hands of those who had stolen it, and, he felt sure, he was being carried to the Torside Private Sanatorium. He did not allow his mind to dwell on the probable motive of such a proceeding; nor did he speculate on what would be his fate when once incarcerated in that lonely and forbidding house. He had no intention of allowing himself to be shut up there—not without a fight, anyway. But a fight, unarmed, and single-handed against such odds could have only one end. Yet, if he could get his hands on the throat of Professor Felger before he was overpowered, he'd teach that treacherous devil——

A great wave of hope rushed through his heart as he caught sight of the scattered glimmer of lights ahead. The car was about to pass through a village—maybe a small town. Help would be within call. It was a chance such as he had scarcely dared to hope for. He did not pause to ask himself why his captors should not have chosen another route, or at least secured his silence by an effective gag. His eyes were fixed on the lighted cottage windows which loomed nearer every second as the car sped on; his heart was oppressed by the dread that they should suddenly swerve into a road which would avoid the village.

He felt his heart beating almost to suffocation as they ran past the first house. Then another, and another—on both sides of the road. It was a small country town that they were passing through—surely the crucial moment had come!

On the left was a row of old-fashioned shops; on the right was a slightly larger building having over the door a blue lamp inscribed with the welcome word, POLICE. Hugh clenched his fists and braced himself for a fight for life. Twenty yards—ten——

The man on Hugh's right made a movement and spoke:

"Here we are, sergeant," he said in the cheerful voice of Ronnie Brewster.

Sergeant Jopling rose from his seat on Hugh's left, put on his helmet, and alighted.

"Thanks for the lift, sir," he said to Ronnie, shaking him warmly by the hand. "I'll be across to your surgery tomorrow morning. Good-night, sir."

IN THE grip of an amazement too deep for words, Hugh watched Sergeant Jopling enter the police station; nor did he trust himself to speak before the car was moving off.

"Say, Ronnie, what in the name of thunder does all this mean? How did I come here? how did you? and Sergeant Jopling? Have I been wandering around in my sleep or something?"

Ronnie Brewster turned and surveyed his companion with a smile.

"Oh, you've been asleep all right. When we found you, we thought you were sleeping the sleep that knows no waking, as the poet says."

"Found me?" Hugh passed his hand across his forehead. "Where?"

"Lying beneath the Devil's Cheese-press, where you'd been lured like an innocent little lamb." Ronnie laid his hand

on Hugh's shoulder as he went on. "Why, you poor old chump, couldn't you guess that the note was a trap? Why, even Jopling—who has about as much intelligence as an automatic cigarette-delivery machine—suspected *that!* When he saw that you had taken the road to Lynton he got me to give him a lift in my car. We went a roundabout way, parked the car at Lynton, and waited and shadowed you from the moment you entered the town. At first we thought you had met the man you came to meet on the cliffs, until we crept nearer and heard the old boy spouting poetry to you. We were close behind you when you started off again, but when you got into the open we had to fall behind, and we lost you altogether when you entered the Valley of the Rocks. Jopling was inclined to give up the chase as a bad job; but I offered to scout round on my own for a bit. I made my way to the high ground and saw you making for the Cheesepress arrangement down in the valley. I had to lose sight of you as I hurried down among the rocks, and when I reached you, it was to find you lying senseless."

"Did you see anybody near?"

"Not a soul."

"Or any animal?"

Ronnie glanced sharply at him before answering.

"I saw two or three goats scampering up the hillside. Why do you ask?"

Hugh parried the question with a careless shrug. He knew well enough that the eyes he had seen did not belong to a goat, but he was in no mood to invite his chum's banter by voicing his suspicions. He turned the conversation into a different channel by asking a question.

"Where are you going now?"

"Home, sweet home," was the laughing reply. "And that's the best place for you for a day or so. I've got a spare bedroom at my shanty just round the corner, and I insist that you stay with me—at least until I can engage a nursemaid to look after you!" Ronnie added with cheerful insult. "What with seeing hobgoblins, and cloven hoofs, and getting sloshed over the nut—well, I'm beginning to think it's not safe to let you go wandering about alone. Were you robbed, by the way?"

Hugh Trenchard nodded.

"But don't ask me any more questions, old chap," he said wearily. "I'll take you into my confidence as soon as I've got things straightened out a bit. Just now everything seems like a crazy jig-saw puzzle."

Ronnie laughed good-naturedly. "I get you, Hugh. In other words, 'Your lips are sealed!' Ha! Ha!—as they used to say in the dear old melodramas which we used to delight in during our salad days. This is my shack," he went on, bringing the car to a standstill before a neat villa on the outskirts of the town. "Up to bed you go, like a naughty little boy! I'll bring you a sedative and a pajama-suit. Then not another word until the morning."

HUGH TRENCHARD slept heavily that night. When he awoke it was broad daylight, and the first thing his gaze lighted on was the figure of his friend, now clad in a suit of sober black, and wearing a most professional high hat.

"Hullo!" cried Hugh. "What's up now? Are you about to attend the funeral of one of your unsuccessful cases?"

"I don't have any unsuccessful cases," Ronnie declared calmly, settling his tie in front of the mirror. "The fact is that I am about to make my usual round of patients, and my grave attire is merely a concession to their prejudices. When you go into practise for yourself you'll soon discover that the average middle-class

country tradesman would sooner expire than be attended by a doctor wearing a tweed suit and soft hat, and it pays a man to deal tenderly with the local superstitions. I'm afraid you'll have to breakfast on your lonesome, for I must be off. Make yourself thoroughly at home, old man, and if you want anything in the way of kit, don't hesitate to borrow mine. How's your poor old nut?"

Hugh put up his hand and tenderly fingered a lump the size of a pigeon's egg.

"I'd just like to have five clean, straight, two-minute rounds with the blighter who gave me that!" he said wistfully. "He'd know how to fight like a white man by the time I'd finished with him!"

Ronnie showed his white, even teeth in an appreciative grin.

"May I be there to see the fun when that happens! But I must rush now. So long."

Left to himself, Hugh made a leisurely toilet and a still more leisurely breakfast. He was in the act of glancing through the pages of a local paper when there came a ring on the surgery bell. At first he took no notice, naturally assuming that the maid would answer; but when the rings had been repeated several times he came to the conclusion that he must be alone in the house. As it was not the usual surgery hours, it must be an urgent case. He rose to his feet and made his way to the door.

"Good morning. I must see Doctor Brewster at once."

The caller was a tall, elderly lady, gray-haired and aristocratic-looking. Her carefully modulated voice held a tremor which showed that she was laboring under deep emotion.

"I'm sorry to say that he's out at present—on his rounds, you know."

"When will he return?"

For a moment Hugh was at a loss for an answer. It had not occurred to him to question Ronnie about the magnitude of his practise.

"Oh, in an hour or two," he said vaguely. "Would you care to leave a message?"

She made a gesture eloquent of despair.

"An hour will be too late. It is an urgent case—an—an accident—a matter of life and death!" She turned and gave him a long, searching look. "Are you a medical man?"

Hugh could not do otherwise than admit the fact.

"But I am only here as a guest. This practise belongs to my friend, and professional etiquette——"

"Etiquette!" she repeated with fierce scorn. "My child is dying—and you talk of etiquette!" She covered her face with her hands and burst into a fit of passionate weeping. "Have you a heart of stone that you stand here wasting moments that may be precious?"

"Of course, since it's really urgent——" Hugh turned and hurried into the dispensary, thrust into his pockets a few articles that he would be likely to need in dealing with such an emergency, caught up his cap and closed the front door behind him.

"Is it far?" he asked.

"Just across the road."

Almost immediately the tall woman pushed open a gate in a high, close-set hedge. The house was large, but somewhat dilapidated, and although the windows were furnished with lace curtains, it bore a curious, indefinable air of being unoccupied. The long front garden which separated it from the road was weed-grown and neglected. But Hugh was too intent on his mission to take note of such details. The moment she opened

the door with a key, he stepped inside, only to stop dead at something that could not be overlooked.

THE hall and staircase were not even carpeted. The dust lay thick on the banisters; the open door of the one room visible revealed bare walls. He had been brought to an empty house. He wheeled, his mind alert with suspicion.

"What jest are you trying to play on me?" he demanded.

The woman closed the door and set her back against it.

"It's played," she said, and her voice was deeper, fuller, with not the slightest trace of its former tremulousness.

For a moment Hugh could only glower at her in silence.

"You have tricked me——" he began sternly, but she cut him short with a soft, rippling laugh.

"Neat, was it not?" she asked coolly. "Not quite sporting of me to take advantage of your better feelings, but it was the only ruse I could think of at short notice. You see, I only rented this house yesterday, and there has been no time——"

"This foolery has gone far enough!" Hugh cried, furious at being duped a second time. "Why have you brought me to this place?"

"To ask you for the sealed packet that was given you by Miss Endean," said the woman slowly. As she spoke, still keeping in the shadow cast by the closed door, she stealthily raised her right hand.

"Packet?" Hugh stammered, for the cool demand had caught him unprepared. "I know of no such packet."

"Think again, Doctor Trenchard."

Hugh laughed.

"Even if I had such a thing in my possession, I certainly would not hand it over to a stranger!"

The strange woman made a swift but incomprehensible movement.

"Indeed? Then will you be good enough to hand it over to *me?*"

She stepped forward as she spoke, so that the ray from the fanlight fell full upon her. Hugh started backward with a shock of surprize. Standing before him, her blue eyes dancing with merriment, her soft red lips rippling back in a mischievous smile, was Joan Endean!

12

"JOAN—Miss Endean! Is it really you?" The words came from Hugh impulsively as he caught her hands in his. "Thank God you are safe!"

The girl smiled a little bitterly as she gently released her hand.

"It may be rather premature to say that either of us is safe if you go shouting my name like that," she returned dryly.

"Then you are in danger?"

Joan shrugged as she held up the gray wig and bonnet, a wry smile playing on her lips.

"You may be sure that a girl does not add forty years to her age just for the fun of the thing!" she said grimly. "Just at this moment there are quite a lot of people who would like to know where to find me."

"The police?" he queried, but she shook her head.

"Oh, I'm not worrying about the police." Her tone was careless and indifferent. "Though I suppose Sergeant Jopling has already sworn a warrant against me for the murder of Silas Marle."

"He could not do that," said Hugh quickly. "The body has disappeared."

"Disappeared? How?" The words came in startled jerks, though it was plain that she was striving to control her voice. "How did the body disappear?"

"Stolen, apparently," and he went on

to give a succinct account of the affair. "It all seems so mad, so fantastic——"

"Maybe it is fantastic, but you'll find there is a very cool and calculating sanity behind its apparent madness."

"You mean that you have guessed the motive?" Hugh cried.

Joan Endean nodded her head.

"The motives, for there were two," she corrected. "Surely you must be aware that it is a principle of English law that no one can be condemned for a murder without the production of the *corpus delicti,* or some identifiable part of it? Then again—and this gives the key to the second motive—on the death of a person who possesses property, the will can not be proved until the actual fact of the death is made clear, and it is a fair assumption that with no body forthcoming there would be no death certificate. Of course it might be possible to get the probate court to presume death, but in this instance it would be a long and costly business, and the mere delay which would have occurred before Silas Marle's effects were handed over to the heir would have served the purpose of whoever removed the body."

"I think I'm beginning to understand. Marle had in his possession something—probably a document — containing a secret, and his body was stolen to prevent that document falling into other hands. Now I come to think of it, I remember that the old man *did* say something about making his will, and even went to the length of engaging a couple of doctors to certify that he was in a fit state of mind. But that does not clear up the mystery of his death."

A slow, enigmatical smile came over Joan Endean's features.

"That is no mystery—to me."

"You know who did it?" he cried, staring. "Why, of course, you were upstairs at the time. You saw the murder committed? That's great! You have only to go to the police——"

"And be arrested myself! I think you have forgotten the indefatigable Sergeant Jopling. No, no, I think I will retain my liberty for the present, for I have much to do."

There was a perceptible pause; then she held out her hand with the question which Hugh had been dreading ever since she had revealed her identity: "Please may I have the sealed packet?"

He felt himself flush under her expectant gaze. How was he to tell her that he had failed in the trust she had reposed in him?

"I—the packet——" he stammered, then stopped.

"You mean that you have allowed it to be stolen from you?"

Hugh nodded mutely, devoutly wishing that the ground might open and swallow him. He seemed to live an age during the pause which followed. With dogged determination he choked back the excuses which rose to his lips. He felt a self-confessed, over-confident fool who had proved himself incapable of a simple task. Why didn't she speak? He could have borne her anger, scorn, recriminations—but not that long, reproachful silence. He dared not raise his eyes to hers, but in imagination he could visualize a look of despair in those eyes of blue —perhaps now brimming with tears——

A faint, unexpected sound made him glance up. Heavens! the girl was actually laughing! Was it hysteria?

"I'm sorry I bungled," his words came in a rush. "I received a note that was signed with your name, and I went alone to keep an appointment at a deserted spot in the Valley of Rocks. There I was suddenly attacked from behind and robbed of the packet. But I'll recover

it!" he went on eagerly. "I'll move heaven and earth——"

"I hope you will not dream of attempting any such herculean task," she smiled. "I should never forgive myself if I allowed you to undertake such exertions over a few sheets of blank paper."

"Blank paper?"

"Yes, it is I who ought to be asking pardon for using you as an unconscious decoy. I was certain that an attempt would be made to steal the packet, and the only means of saving them was to draw a red herring across the trail."

"I see," Hugh said stiffly. "And I was the red herring! I hope you will at least admit that I was an effective one."

He told her what had happened at the Devil's Cheesepress, and the breathless interest with which she listened, no less than the look of gratitude on her face as he finished, was some balm to his ruffled feelings at having been given a dummy packet to guard.

"AND now," he said, when his story was at an end, "I have no wish to appear inquisitive, but I really think I'm entitled to a little explanation on your part. What does it all mean?"

Her eyes avoided his.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to be patient a little longer," she said, and there was a note of almost wistful entreaty in her voice. "I will gladly tell you everything, for God knows I need some one I can trust. But not now."

"You mean that you will give no explanation?" His gaze was like a sword piercing her through.

The girl gave a little hopeless gesture.

"I mean that I can not," she said simply. "Were I to do so, I would be compelled to reveal matters on which I have been sworn to secrecy. Oh, I know that everything about me must look suspicious," she went on quickly. "The way I came to you—the lies I told—my sudden flight when Marle was killed. I can not blame you for doubting me—indeed, I should have a very poor opinion of your reasoning powers if you had obeyed me blindly without debating in your own mind whether you were being made the tool of an adventuress, or at least a woman who was not responsible for her actions. Even if you wash your hands of the whole matter now, I shall always be grateful for the service you have already rendered me—and through me, to the whole civilized world. That surprizes you, no doubt," she went on, as she noted his change of expression. "But you have stepped into something much bigger than you imagine. It is not merely a question of the murder of Silas Marle, or of the unknown thing which haunts the moor. You may regard those incidents as being the first moves in a game of chess—the pawns that are sacrificed to secure the desired opening before the *real* struggle has commenced."

She made the explanation, such as it was, rapidly and unfalteringly, and every word rang true. Her very reticence was in her favor, for he realized it would have been easy to concoct a plausible tale instead of courting suspicion by silence. He moved closer to her.

"And are you, too, one of the pawns that may be sacrificed?"

She parried his question with a shrug of seeming indifference.

"A pawn may become a queen—when she penetrates the enemy's lines," she returned lightly. "But enough of metaphor — the time has come for plain speaking. Will you throw in your lot with me in an endeavor to overthrow the most far-reaching, subtle and diabolical peril that ever threatened the human race?"

"It sounds rather an ambitious undertaking for two people, Miss Endean, but you may count me in on your side. Just tell me where to begin."

She smiled at the light-hearted way in which he assumed his duties. "I'm afraid the initiative does not rest with us; we must wait for Professor Lucien Felger to make his next move. Rest assured it will not be long in coming when he finds that the sealed packet contains blank papers. In the meantime, do not breathe a word to any one about my presence here."

"Not even to Ronnie Brewster?" he said in surprize.

"Not to any one," she repeated. "A chance word might ruin everything. Be wary, be silent, and, above all, be prepared to defend your life."

TRENCHARD took his departure with these ominous words still ringing in his ears. Slipping through the garden at the rear of the house, he followed the narrow lane and reached the street a few hundred yards down. Brewster had already returned from his round of visits, and he looked up with some surprize as Hugh entered.

"You're out early," he remarked in a tone which seemed to invite explanation.

"Yes, I thought a little fresh air would do me good," Hugh replied evasively.

Apparently satisfied with this vague answer, Ronnie applied himself to reading the letter which he held in his hand. Presently he looked up with a question which sent his friend's pulses tingling.

"I've just received a communication from a man who is very anxious to know your present whereabouts. Do you happen to be acquainted with a solicitor named Andrew Shale?"

Hugh recognized the name as that of the solicitor whom he had brought to Moor Lodge at Silas Marle's request. "He was the man who came in the car with you that night," he explained.

"What! the old boy with the gray side-whiskers? Oh, so his name was Shale, was it? Apparently he must know *me* all right, for he has written asking me if I can furnish him with your present address. It might save time if you were to trot down to his office. It's in the High Street — about ten minutes' walk from here."

Hugh agreed and set out at once. He had no difficulty in finding the solicitor's office—it was the only one in the town—and soon he was seated opposite a keen-eyed man of about fifty.

"I scarcely hoped that I should get on your track so soon, Doctor Trenchard," the lawyer remarked. "Last time we met I was given to understand that you were on a walking-tour and that your address would be uncertain for some time to come."

"I fear the tour is abandoned for the time being," Hugh informed him.

The old lawyer beamed through his gold-rimmed glasses.

"So much the better, since that will leave you free to fall in with the plans of my client."

"Who is your client?"

"Mr. Silas Marle."

"You mean the *late* Mr. Silas Marle."

The lawyer shrugged.

"I am obliged to you for the correction, doctor, although I am not quite prepared to admit that my original statement needs amending."

Hugh Trenchard gave him a quick look. "You mean that you think your client is still alive?"

"I do not recollect having said so."

Hugh gave a slight exclamation of impatience. "I make no claim to be an adept in splitting legal straws, Mr. Shale.

I try to speak plainly myself, and I like plain speech in others. If words mean anything, yours must mean that you have a doubt about the fact of Silas Marle's death. Have I interpreted your meaning correctly?"

There was a pause, during which Andrew Shale carefully adjusted his glasses, pushed aside some documents, and leant his elbows on the desk.

"I have been in the legal profession long enough to have a profound reverence for facts—legal facts," he explained in dry, precise tones. "In the eyes of the law, Silas Marle is still alive, inasmuch as he is not legally dead. On several occasions in the past, men commonly supposed to be dead have turned up safe and sound, and in two historic cases innocent men had in the meantime suffered the extreme penalty for their murder. I may add that it was in consequence of the last terrible miscarriage of justice that the law was altered to its present form."

The lawyer selected a document from the pile at his side, opened it, and appeared to run his eye through its contents.

"Curiously enough," he went on, "my client seemed to have a premonition that his death would be disputed, for in addition to making his will in the usual manner, he instructed me to prepare a document, usually termed a letter of attorney, which was to become effective in the event of his disappearance. You will observe that his death was provided for by the usual will—which, however, does not interest us at the present juncture because that same death can not be legally proven. But there is not the slightest doubt as to his complete disappearance; so the deed conferring power of attorney automatically becomes operative."

"I follow you. But what has all this got to do with me?"

"Because you are the sole person who benefits," was the astounding answer. "This deed, executed under the hand and seal of the said Silas Marle, scientist, of Moor Lodge, near Worplecombe, in the County of Somerset, confers on you, Hugh Trenchard, Doctor of Medicine, the legal and unrestricted possession of the whole real and personal estate of the said Silas Marle——"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Hugh, springing up as though a bomb had exploded beneath his chair. "Why, I was a complete stranger to him——"

"——always provided," the lawyer went on, oblivious to the outburst of astonishment, "that the before-mentioned Hugh Trenchard agrees to undertake and to carry out to the best of his skill and ability a certain task, the undertaking of which shall be a necessary condition to——"

"Task?" interrupted Hugh, more bewildered than ever. "What task does he want me to undertake?"

The lawyer laid down the document, and for the first time the ghost of a smile hovered about his shaven lips.

"The necessary condition is somewhat unusual—indeed, I may go so far as to say that it is so extraordinary that my client was well advised to get two medical men to certify his complete sanity before he executed the deed. For in order to become possessed of the not inconsiderable fortune of Silas Marle, you must solemnly covenant to use your utmost endeavor to destroy the supernatural monster which he refers to as 'The Terror of the Moor'."

Hugh Trenchard gets to the heart of the mystery in next month's thrilling chapters of this story. Reserve your copy now at your magazine dealer's.

The Three Marked Pennies

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

A strange destiny awaited the holders of the pennies, with doom for one and weal for the others

EVERY one agreed, after it was over, that the whole thing was the conception of a twisted brain, a game of chess played by a madman—in which the pieces, instead of carved bits of ivory or ebony, were human beings.

It was odd that no one doubted the authenticity of the "contest." The public seems never for a moment to have considered it the prank of a practical joker, or even a publicity stunt. Jeff Haverty, editor of the *News*, advanced a theory that the affair was meant to be a clever, if rather elaborate, psychological experiment—which would end in the revealing of the originator's identity and a big laugh for every one.

Perhaps it was the glamorous manner of announcement that gave the thing such wide-spread interest. Blankville (as I shall call the Southern town of about 30,000 people in which the affair occurred) awoke one April morning to find all its trees, telephone poles, house-sides and store-fronts plastered with a strange sign. There were scores of them, written on yellow copy-paper on an ordinary typewriter. The sign read:

"During this day of April 15, three pennies will find their way into the pockets of this city. On each penny there will be a well-defined mark. One is a square; one is a circle; and one is a cross. These three pennies will change hands often, as do all coins, and on the seventh day after this announcement (April 21) the possessor of each marked penny will receive a gift.

"To the first: $100,000 in cash.

"To the second: A trip around the world.

"To the third: Death.

"The answer to this riddle lies in the marks on the three coins: circle, square, and cross. Which of these symbolizes wealth? Which, travel? Which, death? The answer is not an obvious one.

"To him who finds it and obtains the first penny, $100,000 will be sent without delay. To him who has the second penny, a first-class ticket for the earliest world-touring steamer to sail will be presented. But to the possessor of the third marked coin will be given—death. If you are afraid your penny is the third, give it away—but it may be the first or the second!

"Show your marked penny to the editor of the 'News' on April 21, giving your name and address. He will know nothing of this contest until he reads one of these signs. He is requested to publish the names of the three possessors of the coins April 21, with the mark on the penny each holds.

"It will do no good to mark a coin of your own, as the dates of the true coins will be sent to Editor Haverty."

BY NOON every one had read the notice, and the city was buzzing with excitement. Clerks began to examine the contents of cash register drawers. Hands rummaged in pockets and purses. Stores and banks were flooded with customers wanting silver changed to coppers.

Jeff Haverty was the target for a barrage of queries, and his evening edition came out with a lengthy editorial embodying all he knew about the mystery, which was exactly nothing. A note had come that morning with the rest of his mail—a note unsigned, and typewritten on the same yellow paper in a plain stamped envelope with the postmark of that city. It said merely: *"Circle—1920. Square—1909. Cross—1928. Please do not reveal these dates until after April 21."*

Haverty complied with the request, and played up the story for all it was worth.

The first penny was found in the street by a small boy, who promptly took it to his father. His father, in turn, palmed it off hurriedly on his barber, who gave it in change to a patron before he noted the deep cross cut in the coin's surface.

The patron took it to his wife, who immediately paid it to the grocer. "It's too long a chance, honey!" she silenced her mate's protests. "I don't like the idea of that death-threat in the notice . . . and this certainly must be the third penny. What else could that little cross stand for? Crosses over graves—don't you see the significance?"

And when that explanation was wafted abroad, the cross-marked penny began to change hands with increasing rapidity.

The other two pennies bobbed up before dusk—one marked with a small perfect square, the other with a neat circle.

The square-marked penny was discovered in a slot-machine by the proprietor of the Busy Bee Café. There was no way it could have got there, he reported, mystified and a little frightened. Only four people, all of them old patrons, had been in the café that day. And not one of them had been near the slot-machine—located at the back of the place as it was, and filled with stale chewing-gum which, at a glance, was worth nobody's penny. Furthermore, the proprietor had examined the thing for a chance coin the night before and had left it empty when he locked up; yet there was the square-marked penny nestling alone in the slot-machine at closing time April 15.

He had stared at the coin a long time before passing it in change to an elderly spinster.

"It ain't worth it," he muttered to himself. "I got a restaurant that's makin' me a thin livin', and I ain't in no hurry to get myself bumped off, on the long chance I might get that hundred thousand or that trip instead. No-sirree!"

The spinster took one look at the marked penny, gave a short mouse-like squeak, and flung it into the gutter as though it were a tarantula.

"My land!" she quavered. "I don't want that thing in my pocket-book!"

But she dreamed that night of foreign ports, of coolies jabbering in a brittle tongue, of barracuda fins cutting the surface of deep blue water, and the ruins of ancient cities.

A negro workman picked up the penny next morning and clung to it all day, dreaming of Harlem, before he succumbed at last to gnawing fear. And the square-marked penny changed hands once more.

The circle-marked penny was first noted in a stack of coins by a teller of the Farmer's Trust.

"We get marked coins every now and then," he said. "I didn't notice this one especially—it may have been here for days."

He pocketed it gleefully, but discovered with a twinge of dismay next morning that he had passed it out to some one without noticing it.

"I wanted to keep it!" he sighed. "For better or for worse!"

He glowered at the stacks of some one else's money before him, and wondered furtively how many tellers ever really escaped with stolen goods.

A fruit-seller had received the penny. He eyed it dubiously. "Mebbe you bring-a me those moa, heh?" He showed it to his fat, greasy wife, who made the sign of horns against the "evil eye."

"T'row away!" she commanded shrilly. "She iss bad lock!"

Her spouse shrugged and sailed the circle-marked coin across the street. A ragged child pounced on it and scuttered away to buy a twist of licorice. And the circle-marked penny changed hands once more—clutched at by avaricious fingers, stared at by eyes grown sick of familiar scenes, relinquished again by the power of fear.

Those who came into brief possession of the three coins were fretted by the drag and shove of conflicting advice.

"Keep it!" some urged. "Think! It may mean a trip around the world! Paris! China! London! Oh, why couldn't I have got the thing?"

"Give it away!" others admonished. "Maybe it's the third penny—you can't tell. Maybe the symbols don't mean what they seem to, and the square one is the death-penny! I'd throw it away, if I were you."

"No! No!" still others cried. "Hang on to it! It may bring you $100,000. *A hundred thousand dollars!* In these times! Why, fellow, you'd be the same as a millionaire!"

The meaning of the three symbols was on every one's tongue, and no one agreed with his neighbor's solution to the riddle.

"It's as plain as the nose on my face," one man would declare. "The circle represents the globe—the travel-penny, see?"

"No, no. The cross means that. 'Cross' the seas, don't you get it? Sort of a pun effect. The circle means money—shape of a coin, understand?"

"And the square one——?"

"A grave. A square hole for a coffin, see? Death. It's quite simple. I wish I could get hold of that circle one!"

"You're crazy! The cross one is for death—everybody says so. And believe me, everybody's getting rid of it as soon as they get it! It may be a joke of some kind . . . no danger at all . . . but I wouldn't like to be the holder of that cross-marked penny when April 21 rolls around!"

"I'd keep it and wait till the other two had got what was due them. Then, if mine turned out to be the wrong one, I'd throw it away!" one man said importantly.

"But he won't pay up till all three pennies are accounted for, I shouldn't think," another answered him. "And maybe the offer doesn't hold good after April 21—and you'd be losing $100,000 or a world tour just because you're scared to find out!"

"That's a big stake, man," another murmured. "But frankly, I wouldn't like to take the chance. He might give me his third gift!"

"He" was how every one designated the unknown originator of the contest; though, of course, there was no more clue to his sex than to his identity.

"He must be rich," some said, "to offer such expensive prizes."

"And crazy!" others exploded, "threatening to kill the third one. He'll never get away with it!"

"But clever," still others admitted, "to think up the whole business. He knows human nature, whoever he is. I'm inclined to agree with Haverty—it's all a sort of psychological experiment. He's trying to see whether desire for travel or

greed for money is stronger than fear of death."

"Does he mean to pay up, do you think?"

"That remains to be seen!"

ON THE sixth day, Blankville had reached a pitch of excitement amounting almost to hysteria. No one could work for wondering about the outcome of the bizarre test on the morrow.

It was known that a grocer's delivery boy held the square-marked coin, for he had been boasting of his indifference as to whether or not the square did represent a yawning grave. He exhibited the penny freely, making jokes about what he intended to do with his hundred thousand dollars—but on the morning of the last day he lost his nerve. Seeing a blind beggar woman huddled in her favorite corner between two shops, he passed close to her and surreptitiously dropped the cent piece into her box of pencils.

"I had it!" he wailed to a friend after he had reached his grocery. "I had it right here in my pocket last night, and now it's gone! See, I've got a hole in the darn' thing—the penny must have dropped out!"

It was also known who held the circle-marked penny. A young soda clerk, with the sort of ready smile that customers like to see across a marble counter, had discovered the coin and fished it from the cash drawer, exulting over his good fortune.

"Bud Skinner's got the circle penny," people told one another, wavering between anxiety and gladness. "I hope the kid *does* get that world tour—it'd tickle him so! He seems to get such a kick out of life; it's a sin he has to be stuck in this slow burg!"

Finally it was found who held the cross-marked cent piece. "Carlton . . . poor devil!" people murmured in subdued tones. "Death would be a godsend to him. Wonder he hasn't shot himself before this. Guess he just hasn't the nerve."

The man with the cross-marked penny smiled bitterly. "I hope this blasted little symbol means what they all think it means!" he confided to a friend.

At last the eagerly awaited day came. A crowd formed in the street outside the newspaper office to see the three possessors of the three marked coins show Haverty their pennies and give him their names to publish. For their benefit the editor met the trio on the sidewalk outside the building, so that all might see them.

The evening edition ran the three people's photographs, with the name, address, and the mark on each one's penny under each picture. Blankville read . . . and held its breath.

ON THE morning of April 22, the old blind beggar woman sat in her accustomed place, musing on the excitement of the previous day, when several people had led her—she knew by the odor of fish from the market across the street—to the newspaper office. There some one had asked her name and many other puzzling things which had bewildered her until she had almost burst into tears.

"Let me alone!" she had whimpered. "I ask only enough food to keep from starving, and a place to sleep. Why are you pushing me around like this and yelling at me? Let me go back to my corner! I don't like all this confusion and strangeness that I can't see—it frightens me!"

Then they had told her something about a marked penny they had found in her alms-box, and other things about a large sum of money and some impending

danger that threatened her. She was glad when they led her back to her cranny between the shops.

Now as she sat in her accustomed spot, nodding comfortably and humming a little under her breath, a paper fluttered down into her lap. She felt the stiff oblong, knew it was an envelope, and called a bystander to her side.

"Open this for me, will you?" she requested. "Is it a letter? Read it to me."

The bystander tore open the envelope and frowned. "It's a note," he told her. "Typewritten, and it's not signed. It just says—what the devil?—just says: *'The four corners of the earth are exactly the same.'* And . . . hey! look at this! . . . oh, I'm sorry; I forgot you're . . . it's a steamship ticket for a world tour! Look, didn't you have one of the marked pennies?"

The blind woman nodded drowsily. "Yes, the one with the square, they said." She sighed faintly. "I had hoped I would get the money, or . . . the other, so I would never have to beg again."

"Well, here's your ticket." The bystander held it out to her uncertainly. "Don't you want it?" as the beggar made no move to take it.

"No," snapped the blind woman. "What good would it be to me?" She seized the ticket in sudden rage, and tore it into bits.

At nearly the same hour, Kenneth Carlton was receiving a fat manila envelope from the postman. He frowned as he squinted at the local postmark over the stamp. His friend Evans stood beside him, paler than Carlton.

"Open it, open it!" he urged. "Read it—no, don't open it, Ken. I'm scared! After all . . . it's a terrible way to go. Not knowing where the blow's coming from, and——"

Carlton emitted a macabre chuckle, ripping open the heavy envelope. "It's the best break I've had in years, Jim. I'm glad! Glad, Jim, do you hear? It will be quick, I hope . . . and painless. What's this, I wonder. A treatise on how to blow off the top of your head?" He shook the contents of the letter onto a table, and then, after a moment, he began to laugh . . . mirthlessly . . . hideously.

His friend stared at the little heap of crisp bills, all of a larger denomination than he had ever seen before. "The money! You get the hundred thousand, Ken! I can't believe . . ." He broke off to snatch up a slip of yellow paper among the bills. *"Wealth is the greatest cross a man can bear,"* he read aloud the typewritten words. "It doesn't make sense . . . wealth? Then . . . the cross-mark stood for wealth? I don't understand."

Carlton's laughter cracked. "He has depth, that bird—whoever he is! Nice irony there, Jim—wealth being a burden instead of the blessing most people consider it. I suppose he's right, at that. But I wonder if he knows the really ironic part of this act of his little play? A hundred thousand dollars to a man with—cancer. Well, Jim, I have a month or less to spend it in . . . one more damnable month to suffer through before it's all over!"

His terrible laughter rose again, until his friend had to clap hands to ears, shutting out the sound.

But the strangest part of the whole affair was Bud Skinner's death. Just after the rush hour at noon, he had found a small package, addressed to him, on a back counter in the drug store. Eagerly he tore off the brown paper wrappings, a dozen or so friends crowding about him.

A curiously wrought silver box was what he found. He pressed the catch with trembling fingers and snapped back the

lid. An instant later his face took on a queer expression—and he slid noiselessly to the tile floor of the drug store.

The ensuing police investigation unearthed nothing at all, except that young Skinner had been poisoned with *crotalin*—snake venom—administered through a pin-prick on his thumb when he pressed the trick catch of the little silver box. This, and the typewritten note in the otherwise empty box: *"Life ends where it began—nowhere,"* were all they found as an explanation of the clerk's death. Nor was anything else ever brought to light about the mysterious contest of the three marked pennies—which are probably still in circulation somewhere in the United States.

In Slumber

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

The stench of stagnant waters broke my dream,
Wherethrough had run, with living murmur and gleam,
The Rivers four of the Earthly Paradise:
From the azured flame of those effulgent skies,
And valleys lifting censers of vast bloom,
I was drawn down into a deathlier gloom
Than lies on Styx's fountain. By such light
As shows the newly damned their dolorous plight,
I trod the shivering soil of that demesne,
Whence larvæ swarmed, malignant and obscene,
Like writhen mists from some Maremma recking:
Through the gross air, fell incubi went seeking
Their prey that slumbered helpless; at my knee
There clung the python-bodied succubi;
I heard the wail of them that walked apart,
Each with a suckling vampire at his heart;
And, as I stumbled loathly on, the ground
Was rent with noiseless thunder all around
To pits that teemed with direr prodigies:
Gray, headless coils, and worm-shaped infamies
Unmeasured, rose above the moon that rotted
Black as a corpse in heavens thick and clotted;
The rusty clang and shaken soot of wings
Deafened and stifled me; from pestilent springs
Slime-mantled horrors boiled with fume and hiss
To pour in frothing fury down the abyss.
Then, from an outmost circle of that hell,
The tumbling Harpies came, detestable,
With beaks that in long tatters tore my breast—
And wove from these their crimson, wattled nest!

The Marvelous Knife

By PAUL ERNST

A strange tale is this, about a man who witnessed a murder, and his curious delusion about the weapon with which the crime was committed

WHY do you whisper to each other like that? Why do you look at me like that? As if I were mad! I am not mad. It is you who are mad! You, who have come breaking into this house, into this room, and now stand and stare at me as though I were a monster!

Once I was not quite in my mind. But that is not true now. It is quiet now. It has been quiet, my mind, since that cold night two weeks ago. You will remember that night. It was next morning when the body of James Colson was found, frozen stiff, by the ditch in front of his estate.

That cold black night! I will tell you about that, about what I saw and what I did. The day after it, when some of you came to my house and searched, saying Jess Clegg had sent you, I told you nothing. And your search found nothing, so you went away without me. But I will tell you now. And you will see that you are mad to look so horrified now, and you will laugh with me. You will laugh as Jess Clegg must have laughed when he whispered to you to search my house.

I could not sleep that night. You, who know me, know how many nights there have been since I retired from my classroom when I could not sleep. A fire in my brain seemed to keep me from sleep. Some of you know about that fire. Some of you have looked and whispered as I passed by, and made motions on your foreheads, long before tonight. As though a fire in a man's brain that would not let him sleep was a thing to laugh at!

Well, that night the fire leaped high. I sat on the edge of my bed with my head in my hands. I could not sleep. I could not! So I dressed, that night, late, after midnight, and went out to walk the highway till the cold should put the fire out.

It was black, and bitter, under the ice-blue stars. The freezing black wind soothed my forehead, pressed the fire down low. I turned from the main road into the road that went past James Colson's estate.

"I will go up this road and around and back to my little house," I told the ice-blue stars. "I will be able to sleep now. I will . . . sleep."

Then I saw a great black shadow beside the road near the ditch. The tall gates of the Colson grounds loomed near, but no taller and blacker than this other shadow. I walked closer to see what this tall black shadow might be.

It was thus I saw Jess Clegg that night. Oh, yes, you look surprized. But I saw him that night. And the reason I am here now is that I saw him.

You know Jess Clegg. Such a huge man! Such a powerful, thick-muscled man! A bull throat, a heavy face, shoulders three feet across, voice that roars—that is Jess Clegg. I had never liked him because he was the loudest laugher when I passed by, and it was he that named me the Crazy Professor.

He was the thick black shadow tower-

ing beside the ditch near the Colson gates. I saw his face and at the same time saw something else under the ice-blue stars. Another shadow. But this one lay on the ground, stretched out beside the ditch, at the feet of bull-throated, roaring Jess Clegg.

As I saw this, he heard my step and saw me. He stared at me with his red face a white blotch in the night. In the white blotch his eyes shone like a cat's and I turned to run from there; for I have never liked Jess Clegg, and I feared him very much. I feared him—that fine, good man!

"The Crazy Professor," I heard him say. He did not roar—he whispered. And I felt an odd thing, then. I felt that he feared me. *He* feared *me!* Was that not odd—when Jess Clegg was thrice as strong and huge as I? "The Crazy Professor! Here! Now!"

I DID not run as I intended. He smiled at me. I was surprized. He has not often smiled at me. He has more often laughed, and slapped my back in pretended fellowship that has left me lame for days afterward. But now he smiled, and crooked his finger at me.

"Come here, Professor," he said, smiling, his face a white blotch in the night. "Come here. You have seen this much, you may as well see more."

I came nearer and as I came I looked at the shadow stretched at his feet beside the ditch. And I saw that this shadow was James Colson, seeming to sleep there with his mouth all twisted and his eyes tight-closed. And I saw that in Jess Clegg's big hand there was a knife, and the knife dripped red. . . .

I say I saw. But I do not mean that, as you will realize very soon. For I did not see it. I only *thought* I saw it. Jess Clegg explained it very patiently and thoroughly, as I am now explaining to you.

But at that moment I thought I saw the knife, dripping red, in Jess Clegg's huge hand. And I thought I saw a red hole in Colson's throat. Then as I came nearer, Jess Clegg's hand opened and the knife flashed to the black ground beside the road.

"Come here," he said again, as I stopped a few feet away. "Closer, Professor, closer. And tell me what you see."

"I see James Colson, dead," I said, in my ignorance, walking slowly closer. "And I see a bloody knife beside him."

Then I was very near to Jess Clegg, and his right hand came out quickly and caught the lapels of my overcoat. He drew me near—smiling, eyes gleaming in his face. His great left hand slid across my right shoulder and hooked around the back of my neck. It held me as though a great thick clamp of steel were thrown around me; held my head cupped immovable in its vise. And his right arm drew back a little as though about to strike. But still I was not afraid of him because I felt that he feared me.

"You have seen a lot, Professor," he said, his bared teeth showing yellow and broken in the red cave of his mouth. "You may even have seen me take money from Colson's pocket, eh?"

"I did not see that," I replied. "But I see him dead, and your knife——"

His right hand thrust forward. It was not doubled. It was open. The heel of his palm struck against my forehead with his thick arm stiff behind it. His left hand held the back of my head so that the blow could not be dodged.

It is hard to tell you of the power of that blow. But you all know Jess Clegg, how strong he is. You have seen him lift a thousand pounds of flour.

He struck me again, the heel of his right hand coming against my forehead with a padded thud while his left hand held my head from jarring back. A white light was the light of a cracking sun searing my brain.

"Listen, Professor." The words came slowly from between his bared teeth. "You have not seen these things. You understand? You have seen nothing."

The heel of his hand was like a pile-driver. The white light climbed high and exploded with every blow. And each explosion seemed to leave behind a link which formed a chain creeping to encircle my brain in an iron ring.

"You understand?" he said to me. "You did not see these things. You saw no knife. Nothing. You understand?"

WITH every few words his huge right hand banged against my forehead. The iron chain formed a complete circle at last. It tightened and tightened around my naked brain. His left hand was all that kept me from collapsing to the ground.

"You understand, Professor? There was no knife. Colson lies here asleep. Only asleep. You understand?"

The padded pounding of his hand, with arm and shoulder heavy behind it! The chain tightening . . .

"You did not see me here, Professor. You saw nothing."

With that, I felt the warm blood spout from my nose. And then a great thing happened, gentlemen—a fine thing, done for me by my fine friend, Jess Clegg. It would never have happened if I had not risen in the black cold night, walked because I could not sleep—and chanced to see him beside the sleeping Colson.

With the gush from my nose the chain snapped from around my naked mind. The pressure was at once released. And with that release came also release from the burning fire that has plagued me since I retired from my professorship a year ago.

I tell you it was marvelous, the relief that came with the spurt of blood! My mind felt cool and well again. Cool and well. And I looked at my benefactor.

Jess Clegg must have seen the difference expressed in my face, for suddenly he stopped hitting me. He stared into my eyes, and he moistened his lips, and I thought his white face went whiter.

"God," I heard him say, "what did I do to him? His eyes. . . ."

Then, staggering a little, I stroked his huge right hand, that had worked such a miracle, and I smiled at him, and as I smiled I felt his left hand tremble and release me hurriedly.

He turned to run from me. Why, I do not know.

"Wait," I called to him. "Wait. Why do you run from this man sleeping here? He must be moved or he will freeze."

He stopped and looked at me, wide-eyed, over his shoulder. Then he came back. He moved slowly, watching me every second. And then I saw him nod his head, and saw his eyes go narrow and cunning.

"Sleeping?" he said. "Sleeping?"

"You told me he was sleeping," I reminded him.

He nodded again. "Yes, yes! That is right. He is only sleeping. We must not wake him."

He bent down and picked up something—the bloodied thing I had seen—or thought to see—in his hand.

"Take this knife, Professor," he said, the cunning light growing in his eyes. "Take it home with you and keep it. Keep it safely, for it is a very wonderful knife. It is a magic knife. And this is its magic: *It does not exist at all!* You

think you see it. You think you feel its weight in your hand. But all the while there is no knife at all."

I stared and stared at the knife in my hand. It was indeed miraculous. I could see every detail of it—a plain butcher-knife ground thin. I could see every spatter of blood on it. And yet I did not see it at all!

I held this treasure close to me.

"And there is no wound in Colson's throat?" I asked Jess Clegg.

"No," said my good friend. "No. With this wonderful knife you could stab a man again and again, and there would be no wound. For it does not exist, you see. There is no knife. There only seems to be."

He caught my shoulder and put his face close to mine.

"If anybody sees you with this marvelous knife, tell him all about it. Tell him how it doesn't really exist, and how you can stab with it and leave no wound and do no harm. And remember, you did not see me here tonight, either. Understand?"

That was what Jess Clegg told me, and I believe Jess Clegg. For he was the one who put the fire out in my brain. And I took the knife home with me, as he told me to, and I hid it very carefully. And when next day some man came and looked all through my house, as Jess Clegg whispered to them to do, they did not find the knife. They found blood on my overcoat, but they also saw how blood had gushed from my nose, and they said the blood on the coat was my own blood and they would not take me, because they knew where to find me. I did not understand what all this meant, and I did not understand why Jess Clegg should send men to search my house when he knew I had the marvelous knife there which might be stolen. But some of you were with those men, and perhaps you understand.

It was then that I heard of the finding of Colson's body, frozen stiff, and I blamed myself. For in the excitement of getting the knife safe home I had forgotten to wake Colson.

So, then, you understand? You see how it all was? But I suppose you wonder why I am in this room. I suppose that is why you stare at me in that strange way. Well, I will tell that, too.

AFTER the fire had been put out in my brain that night by my kind friend, Jess Clegg, I could sleep. And I did sleep. Very much. Twenty hours a day, for a few days. It was all right, as I live alone and had no one to reproach me with sleeping that way, like a little child. So I slept and slept.

But between sleeps I always got out the marvelous knife and played with it. And always I desired to admire its strange power. I wanted to stab and stab with it, and see, miraculously, no wound result. How solid and real it felt! I laughed at that solidity, knowing the truth.

I thought of going out to the roadside and asking the first person who approached to let me show him how my wonderful knife could stab without wounding. But then I thought of my kind friend, the man who had generously given this thing to me. I thought of Jess Clegg.

"He will most enjoy this game," I told myself. "I shall go to him."

And then I had another thought, a delightful thought, one to laugh aloud over.

"I shall go to him at just the hour when he demonstrated the wonderful knife to James Colson beside the ditch!"

So I left my house at five minutes after midnight, hugging the precious knife

close to my breast. And I came to Jess Clegg's house. This house.

He would be sleeping, as Colson had been sleeping. I chuckled. He would be sleeping. After the game I would wake him, and tell him how wonderful was the thing he had given me, and thank him for all he had done for me. Then he could take the knife that did not exist and use it on me, if he liked.

Because I did not want to wake him, I came very silently through the window opening onto his porch. And very silently, chuckling to myself, I came up to this bedroom.

He was there, sleeping on the bed next to the window. The light through the window fell on him. He was on his back, with his immense arms flung wide, and his massive legs sprawled. He was moaning a little in his sleep.

I crept without a sound to the side of the bed, chuckling at the joke. I stood there watching him, listening to him breathe, listening to him moan and whisper James Colson's name. I raised the marvelous knife.

"Shall I wake him first?" I asked myself, with the knife held high over his chest.

But I told myself that it would be more delightful if I went through with the game first and then woke him, even as he had gone through with the game while Colson lay by the ditch asleep.

It was thirty-one minutes past midnight, the time when I had first seen him beside the ditch with Colson at his feet.

I drove downward with the miraculous knife that can stab without leaving a mark.

He shouted aloud in his sleep, screamed and shouted and begged. And I laughed, for he was evidently too sleep-fogged to remember that it was all a game. And the knife did look very real. So, too, did the red flood that seemed to well from his chest.

He reached for the knife and caught the naked blade in his hand, but I pulled it free though he gripped hard. Then I struck again and he went back to sleep—as Colson had slept in the bitter blackness beside the ditch.

I went on with the game. Again and again I plied the knife, stabbing and stabbing, cutting and cutting—and leaving no mark! That was the marvelous part. No mark, as you can see for yourselves. For those red gashes and holes are not really there. Jess Clegg will tell you, as he told me so carefully that night as he pounded and pounded at my forehead.

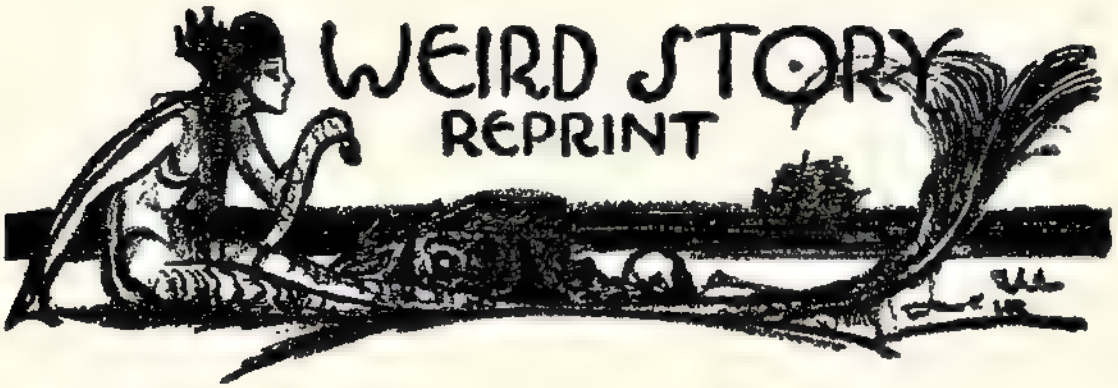
Then you came bursting into the room. . . .

But why do you whisper among yourselves? Why do you stare at me like that? I have explained all about it now. You should understand the truth now.

This knife, dripping red? It does not really exist. The marks on Jess Clegg as he sleeps here? There are no marks. That is the wonder of the knife.

Sssh! You'll wake him. . . .

Why do you *stare* at me?



The Parasitic Hand*

By R. ANTHONY

NOTES FROM THE DIARY OF DR. BURNSTRUM

1. *The External Hand*

JUNE 6, 1925.—This morning I encountered the strangest case of my twenty years of practise. John Pendleton, a young real estate agent of Cassia City, requested physical examination, particularly of a growth on his left side. After he had stripped I saw that he had a bandage taped to his side.

Upon removal of the bandage the growth proved to be a *completely formed right hand,* its base (or wrist) fastened at the curve of the eleventh rib, directly beneath the armpit. The hand was slightly open, the palm turned outward and upward. In size it was that of a babe's several months old.

"How long have you had this?" I asked Pendleton.

"Always, as far back as I can remember," he answered. "I was born with it, so I was told. But it wasn't always the same size."

I looked up in surprize. "Not the same size? What do you mean?"

He hesitated and flushed. "Well, it—it was——" He made a quick gesture and added energetically, "Doctor, don't think me a fool, or an imaginative idiot. I am a college man and not given to silly imaginings. It's the truth I am telling you, remember. That hand used to be small, very small. But in the last three months *the hand has been growing steadily.* And you see its present size!"

A parasitic hand it was, clearly so. I knew the thing, for I had seen such structures before. But a growing hand! And growing after the host had reached maturity! That seemed impossible.

By accident I placed an index finger against the palm of the hand. Immediately its fingers closed upon my forefinger and gripped it firmly. Here was surprize! Usually these parasitic growths are inactive, without nerves and provided with a very scant blood supply. But the grip of this parasitic hand was firm and strong, like that of a babe. It took considerable effort to release my finger, so tenacious was the grip.

* From WEIRD TALES for November, 1926.

And after I had freed myself, it continued to close and open, much like a small babe's, and finally made an infant fist.

Pendleton nodded as he observed the experiment.

"That's what it does to me," he said, "but only since the last six weeks. It never did that before then. Now it's a nuisance. It clutches at everything I put on—at my underwear, my shirt, my pajamas. The only way I can keep it from pulling and tearing at my clothes is to bandage it and tape it fast to my body. Even then I feel it wriggle and clutch at things. It's bothered me a lot. What does this thing mean, doctor?"

"Well——" I hesitated.

"Go ahead, doctor," Pendleton urged. "I've been told that it's a sort of parasite. But I don't understand exactly. How the deuce can an extra hand be a parasite? Why should a hand grow from my side? Remember, I was born with it."

"You probably were a twin," I explained, "at least in the early stages of your embryonic life. In fact, you and the twin probably came from a single egg. Identical twins, you know, come from a single fertilized egg. Sometimes such twins are equally developed; more often one twin is better developed than the other. What it means is that the twins compete with each other during embryonic and fetal life, and one may develop at the expense of the other. As a matter of fact, one twin may absorb the other, sometimes completely so, sometimes leaving a few traces such as a hand or foot. Apparently you absorbed your twin nearly completely. This hand is all that is left of him."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Pendleton ejaculated in wonderment. "But I clearly see how that is possible and that your explanation fits. But look here, doctor: then in a way I must be two personalities merged in one body—myself and the other twin."

He paused and his eyes grew wide with some astonishing thought.

"Doctor! Do you—do you suppose that the personality, the soul, of the other twin is still intact and is now trying to establish itself in this growing hand?"

"Of course not," I said firmly.

But while I photographed him and bandaged the hand, the idea suggested by his question kept revolving in my mind. I may as well put down my ideas of the matter:

If the interpretation of twins is correct, then Pendleton is the autosite and the hand is all that is left of the parasite. But what became of the personality, the soul of the parasite, when its body was merged into that of the stronger twin, the autosite? If we allow it entity, then the fact that the parasitic hand, after being dormant for twenty-three years, is now growing, would seem to indicate that the parasite was dominated by Pendleton until he had attained his full development, and that now the dormant personality of the other twin is asserting itself and trying to establish its own proper self. A strange theory, yet it seems to fit. How else account for the growth?

JUNE 7, 1925.—I have the general photographs and the X-rays before me. The X-rays show that the hand is completely formed, all carpals, metacarpals and phalanges being clear and of proper shape. Rudiments of radius and ulna are present, but fade away near the point of attachment of the hand. The muscles and fasciæ of the hand are attached to the intercostal muscles below the eleventh rib. Blood supply from an intercostal artery. A doubtful spot may be a ganglion for the nerve supply.

June 15, 1925.—Pendleton in again today, after a week's absence from town. At my question, "How is the hand getting on?" he answered shortly, "See for yourself, doctor."

He stripped, and I proceeded to remove the tape and bandages.

I started back when I saw the hand. "Why, it has grown!" I exclaimed. "It seems twice as large as last week. Like that of a child of five or six years!"

Pendleton nodded grimly. "That's why I told you to see for yourself, doctor! I wanted you to be sure about that fact. What are you going to do with it?"

"Remove it," I said firmly. "This week! It should not be a very serious matter."

A queer look came into Pendleton's eyes. "You don't suppose that in removing this—er—this—what is left of my twin, we would be—er—doing murder?"

I smiled at the fancy. "No, hardly. You may liken this hand to a tumor. Removal of a tumor does not constitute murder, does it? A tumor is a parasitic growth. This hand is a parasitic growth. We remove parasitic growths before they become too dangerous. Murder?"

"Well, no," he said. "But I had a crazy dream about it the other night," he added apologetically. "I dreamed I saw my twin and that he said, 'You have had your share of life at my expense. Now I want my own. Don't you dare tamper with things. I'm going to have my way.' And then I woke up."

"Rather obvious," I commented. "A natural sequence of our conversation of twin entities, or rather, of one twin overcoming the other. Nothing to it, my boy." I patted him on the shoulder. "What do you say about three days from now? That will give you time to prepare. Not a serious operation, you understand. But it is good to be prepared."

He assented, and after taking a few more photographs I dismissed him.

July 21, 1925.—San Francisco, Calif. A telegram just received from Pendleton: "Come back to operate. Urgent."

The illness and death of my father had called me to California before I could operate on Pendleton. And the disposition of the estate required a longer absence than contemplated.

I wired back, "On way in two days. Expect me by twenty-fifth."

July 26, 1925.—Back in Cassia City. Pendleton met me at the station this afternoon. He looked pale and thin and haunted. Despite the heat he was shivering.

"Thank God you have come, doctor!" he cried. "I am going insane."

I looked at him curiously. "You don't mean that the hand——"

"It's—it's growing, doctor!" His eyes held a wild and frightened look. "It is larger—and a *part of the forearm has grown out!*"

I stared at him in unbelief. "Hardly possible," I said.

"But it is," he insisted. "Doctor, you haven't known me for a fool. This thing has given me no rest for a month. It is always twisting and pulling, as if it were trying to reach into me for something. It's driving me mad!"

The taxi stopped at my office and we hurried in. Pendleton stripped quickly and jerked off the bandages.

"There!"

He was right. The hand had grown and now was the size of that of a vigorous boy of fourteen or fifteen. But, in addition, the *lower half of a forearm had grown out!*

JULY 27, 1925.—Removed the parasitic hand from Pendleton's side this morning. Would not repeat the opera-

tion for a million dollars. It was a terrifying experience.

General and local anesthetics used. But while P. responded excellently, the parasitic hand remained active; in fact, it seemed to be animated with a fighting spirit. It seized the wrist of one of the surgical nurses during the preliminaries and held it in a relentless grip, so that she fainted in horror.

Later, when I proceeded to make the first incision, it seized my wrist and with remarkable force tried to direct the scalpel *toward Pendleton's heart.* Only by dropping the scalpel did I avoid stabbing P. to death.

I then applied anesthetics to the hand itself, with no appreciable results. Finally, in desperation, I pushed a wad of cotton into the hand, threw a loop around its wrist and had one of the nurses hold it taut. By thus misleading and misdirecting its efforts I was able to proceed. (How silly these words sound, as if I had been dealing with a separate entity! And yet that seems to be the only plausible assumption that would help to explain.)

Throughout the operation the hand kept up its writhing and clutching motions. As I made the final cut it jerked loose from my hand, fell to the floor and then fastened around the ankle of the chief surgical nurse. In horror she dropped the instruments, screaming hysterically, and ran out of the operating-room and fainted in the hallway.

I darted after her and removed the fiendish hand. Even then it kept up its autonomous struggle. It was with a feeling of relief that I dropped it into a jar filled with preservative and returned to complete my work on Pendleton.

I was careful to remove all traces of the attaching structures, and also treated the vestiges with X-rays to destroy all rudiments of the growth.

The operation, though simple, and normally requiring perhaps half an hour, lasted nearly four hours, because of the constant interference of the parasitic hand. Brent, the intern in charge of the anesthesia, the three nurses and I were complete wrecks at the end of the ordeal. After we wheeled the operating-table from the room and turned the patient over to the special nurse, we found that the nurses had fallen to the floor, either in a faint or exhausted.

Brent looked over the room. "Rather like a shambles today," he remarked in a ghoulish humor.

I nodded and dropped into a chair, and knew no more. I believe I fainted also.

August 10, 1925. — Pendleton dismissed from the hospital today. Only a circular scar indicates the position of the parasitic hand.

2. *The Internal Hand*

MARCH 5, 1926.—Pendleton dropped in this morning. He looked worried and thoughtful.

"You're not sleeping well, my boy," I told him.

"You wouldn't sleep well, either, doctor, if you felt something clawing within you."

I manifested surprize. "What do you mean?"

He smiled wearily. "Exactly what I said. Something clawing and pulling within me. And right at the place where that hand was removed."

"Hm!" I muttered. "That sounds rather curious."

"Call it crazy, but I know what it is like. It is as if a hand were gripping lightly, shoving things aside, pulling at me; as if somebody—doctor, *that hand is coming back!*"

I looked sharply at him. No, he did not look silly. Of course, like other phy-

sicians, I knew that the imagination can produce astonishing delusions. But Pendleton did not seem to me to be of that sort.

"Strip and get up on the examining-table," I ordered tersely.

With a sigh he obeyed. I could find little. The circular scar showed signs of disappearing. Below it the abdomen seemed faintly distended, but not enough to be symptomatic. The stethoscope revealed only the normal sounds, and palpation was similarly uninforming.

"Let's see what an X-ray will show," I suggested.

March 6, 1916.—Just examined the X-ray prints. Nothing indicated, no signs of congestion as in a tumorous growth.

I went back through the files for the X-rays taken last June. Comparison showed that some of the internal organs had been displaced. The stomach, for one, was pushed to the right a distance of nearly two inches.

This discovery surprized me, and in my astonishment I dropped the print. I bent down to pick it up, and jerked back in amazement; for from a distance I saw what had escaped me in a closer view: *a hand was outlined within the body,* to the left of the stomach.

I picked up the print and examined it carefully. No, it was not a positive structure. It was merely that certain structures had been pushed aside and that the vacated portion had the outline of a hand. No evidence of actual entity, only the hand-like outline.

A puzzling case! Is Pendleton right in saying that the hand has returned? But it isn't an actual structure. A phantom, then?

March 15, 1926.—Pendleton complains of internal pains and difficulty in breathing. I have prescribed sedatives.

March 20, 1926.—Pendleton ordered to the hospital last night. Another X-ray taken, with orders to rush. Just examined the plate. The hand-shaped space has increased in size and has pushed upward. The technician called my attention to it. So she had noticed it, too! But there is no sign of a tumor. Just an absence of structures, an outline of a hand. What to do?

March 22, 1926.—Pendleton suffering and in agony. "It's reaching for my heart!" he groaned. "Can't you do something, doctor?"

I gave him a strong sedative. After that I discussed with Brent the chances of an operation. But operate for what?

After that I went to the surgery and told the nurses of the possibility of operating on P. in a day or two. Miss Cummings, the chief surgical nurse, and her two assistants paled at the announcement and then did something rather unethical. They refused.

"No," said Miss C., with a shiver. "No, doctor! I can't work with you on that case. I should faint with terror."

Her two assistants expressed themselves similarly.

"Please, doctor! Don't ask me," said Miss Cummings. "I'll—I'll never forget how—how that—that *thing* seized my ankle."

She collapsed at the recollection and began to cry softly.

"Do you wish Pendleton to die without a chance?" I asked gravely. "I must do something, I am afraid, but I do not know what to do. I do not know what is troubling him. He is suffering; that is evident. The X-rays tell too little. As it is, I must proceed on a pure guess. I do not know what I'll find. But it is Pendleton's only chance. That is, if you will do your duty."

"Duty!" The appeal to duty was effective. Miss Cummings smiled faintly and

said in a low voice, "Very well, doctor! I'll try!"

Her assistants nodded in fearful assent.

MARCH 23, 1926.—The climax came this morning. I was making the rounds of the patients and stopped in Pendleton's room. He had slept quietly last night, he said. "Still, I feel queer, doctor! As if things had come to a decision. Sort of ready for the final battle. It's going for my heart, I know, trying to take my life for its own. Can't you do something, doctor?"

I reassured him and remarked that we would probably operate on him tomorrow.

"Thank God!" he muttered. "I don't think I can stand this much longer. Do you think you can rid me of this—whatever it is?"

"I hope so," I answered. "In fact," I added, quite contrary to my actual belief, "I feel sure that I can. I've been studying up this matter and know something definite now."

My fabulation gave him confidence and he seemed more cheerful. So I left him and went down the corridor to see other patients.

Scarcely ten minutes later I heard a fearful scream, a choking cry of "Help!"

I rushed into the hallway and saw the nurses making for Pendleton's room. But they stopped at his door and shrank back.

I ran up and pushed them aside.

Pendleton was in a turmoil, his bed a cyclone of whirling sheets and blankets. He was twisting, tumbling, and bounding up and down, his groans fearful to hear.

Just a few seconds! Then the sheets were whipped aside and I saw Pendleton. His face was red, eyes blood-shot and staring glassily, the mouth wide open, chin pendent, and tongue protruding.

"He's—he's—got me!" he gasped. His body rocked uncertainly on his hips in a rotary motion; a final "A-a-ah-h-h!" Then he snapped erect, and fell over on his side.

Pendleton was dead. I tried restoratives, but it was no use. The coroner, Dr. Bidwinkle, performed the autopsy, in which I helped him. We found the abdominal organs pushed aside as indicated in the X-rays. Just above this the diaphragm was ruptured, the lung shoved aside, the pericardium ripped open. The heart was contracted and furrowed, as if *a fully grown hand had squeezed it until it stopped beating.*

Dr. Bidwinkle was astounded. "Of all the crazy things!" he muttered.

So I told him of the case and also showed him the photographs.

"Hell!" he exclaimed, after I had concluded. "You and I, Burnstrum, don't know it all. I think you're right, but we can't afford to expose ourselves to possible ridicule. Your X-rays and witnesses wouldn't convince one out of ten physicians. There are some people that you simply can't convince. So why bother? Here's what I propose to put down on the certificate: 'Death from hemorrhage induced by internal rupture.' Do you agree?"

"Yes, it will be better that way," I said. "But kindly note this!" I added, turning to Pendleton's body.

I reached over and placed the fingers of my hand—the right hand—into the impressions or furrows of Pendleton's heart. *The fingers and thumb fitted the grooves.*

Coming Next Month

THE shadowy room swam before Yasmina's frightened gaze. The roots of her hair prickled her scalp, and her tongue clove to her palate. Somewhere a gong sounded a deep, ominous note. The dragons on the tapestries glowed like blue fire, and then faded out. The Master on his dais was but a shapeless shadow. The dim light gave way to soft, thick darkness, almost tangible, that pulsed with strange radiations. She could no longer see the Master. She could see nothing. She had a strange sensation that the walls and ceiling had withdrawn immensely from her. Then somewhere in the darkness a glow began, like a firefly that rhythmically dimmed and quickened. . . .

In a ghostly gray light she saw again the dais and the cryptic robed figure seated upon it. The hooded head was bent, the high shoulders faintly etched against the uncertain dimness. She could make out no details clearly, but the hood, where the velvet cap had been, stirred a formless uneasiness in her. As she stared, there stole over her a nameless fear that froze her tongue to her palate—a feeling that it was not the Master who sat so silently on that black dais. Then the figure moved and rose upright, towering above her. It stooped over her and the long arms in their wide black sleeves bent about her. She fought against them in speechless fright, surprized by their lean hardness. The hooded head bent down toward her averted face. And she screamed, and screamed again in poignant fear and loathing. Bony arms gripped her lithe body, and from that hood looked forth a countenance of death and decay—features like rotting parchment on a moldering skull. She screamed again, and then, as those champing, grinning jaws bent toward her lips, she lost consciousness. . . .

The amazing thing that happened to Yasmina will be told in this astounding tale of the castle of wizards on the Mountain of the Black Seers; eery magic of an adept who is centuries old; stark terror and sudden death. And through it all—fighting, stabbing, dealing swift death in red combat—moves the heroic figure of Conan the barbarian soldier of fortune. This smashing weird novel will begin in next month's WEIRD TALES:

THE PEOPLE OF THE BLACK CIRCLE

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

——ALSO——

NAKED LADY

By MINDRET LORD

This is not a sex story, but is an ingenious tale of West Indian voodoo and a millionaire's strange scheme for vengeance on his wife.

VINE TERROR

By HOWARD WANDREI

An unusual weird-scientific tale, about vegetable vampires that lusted for animal and human food.

THE SINISTER PAINTING

By GREYE LA SPINA

An eery story of a fiendish murder and a midget psychic investigator—by the author of "Invaders From the Dark" and "The Devil's Pool."

THE JEST OF WARBURG TANTAVUL

By SEABURY QUINN

An unusual ghost story of vivid power and gripping human appeal—a story of Jules de Grandin.

Sept. WEIRD TALES Out Sept. 1

THE argument about the covers by M. Brundage, instead of subsiding, seems to grow hotter and more furious. Many of you have written to the Eyrie protesting against nudes and near-nudes on our covers, though only a few of our readers object to the covers on artistic grounds. So far, those who like Brundage's covers are a great majority, to judge by the letters that pour in to the editor's desk; but those of you who object to nude womanhood on the covers of WEIRD TALES are very emphatic. The manner in which Brundage portrays scenes from the featured stories is, we think, artistic; and there is a vast difference between Brundage's handling of nudity, and the lascivious females that cavort across the covers of the sexy magazines. The stories in WEIRD TALES are certainly not sexy. But the magazine belongs to you, the readers, and if you wish us to banish nudity from our covers, we will do so.

Too Buxom

Miss Virginia MacRae, of Oswego, New York, writes: "I think Brundage's nudes can not be surpassed. I first bought WT on the strength of its covers, and they did not give me any so-called 'sexy' impression. Nudes slightly draped are much more suggestive than the wholly undraped. Your best cover was the January one, and the black background is very striking. I was counting on making a three-panel screen of such covers, but I won't put such absurd covers on as the March issue's *Black Gargoyle*—it looks like Al Jolson incog. The story was good, however. Brundage's November cover, 'Beauty with Death Emblem,' is too buxom—you know where! September's figure is lovely. Please do not dispense with these nudes. . . . But you haven't had one nude figure with lovely long hair since January. I should hate to have to wait ten years or so to obtain the best covers for my screen."

Monsters on the Covers

A. T. Jolliffe, of Bountiful, Utah, writes: "May I break an eleven years' silence? I have read WEIRD TALES avidly since 1923 and am still hopelessly addicted. . . . Your best author was, now is, and probably always will be H. P. Lovecraft. Clark Ashton Smith is your finest poet; Rankin, your best black and white illustrator; and Brundage, your most effective cover artist. Brundage's nudes are O. K.—very beautiful work. I notice some readers have been asking for weird and terrifying monstrosities on the covers, but let me register an emphatic protest against them. No artist, however gifted, can hope to express with brush, pen, or pencil, the horrors *suggested* by Lovecraft, Smith, Dyalhis, and others. Great Cthulhu and Tsathoggua should never be made to pose as models. To bolster my assertion, I refer you to Brundage's red scorpion on the June cover—quite an ordinary monster as WEIRD TALES monsters go, but it inspires risibility, not horror. For a more awful example still, take Clark Ashton Smith's illustration to his own story, *The Colossus of Ylourgne*. Smith can produce poetry of marvelous beauty. As a prose author he is very readable, although his stories fall far behind the perfection of his verse; but as an artist—!!! His 'demons,' disappearing into the prostrate corpses, send one into fits of laughter, not shuddering, they are so reminiscent of the comical 'critters' with which Doctor Seuss adorns the pages of *Judge* and *Life*. No!—no monsters on the covers, please!

(Please turn to page 268)

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established in early 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Jan.	Jan.	____	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
____	____	____	Feb.-Mar.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
Mar.	Mar.	____		____	Mar.	Mar.
Apr.	Apr.	____	Apr.-May	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.
____	May	____		____	May	May
June	June	____	Jun.-Jul.	June	June	June
July	July	July		July	July	July
Aug.	____	____	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	____
Sept.	____	____	____	Sept.	Sept.	____
Oct.	____	____	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	____
Nov.	____	____	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	____
Dec.	____	Dec.	____	Dec.	Dec.	____

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back copies on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back issues is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

WEIRD TALES

840 N. Michigan Ave. Chicago, Illinois

(Continued from page 266)

Let me close with an eulogy of C. L. Moore. *Shambleau* was grand; so was *Black Thirst; Scarlet Dream* is a masterpiece. Ye gods!—what will the forthcoming *Dust of Gods* be like? I live only in anticipation."

Are Our Covers Too Lurid?

Dwight A. Boyce, of Ludlow, Massachusetts, writes: "Can't something be done about those lurid covers? Judging by the letters appearing in the Eyrie, the readers of WT are somewhat above the general type of pulp-reader — by no means are they morons. And I feel, with many others, that the covers on WEIRD TALES are hardly consistent with the policy of the magazine. I have not the least objection to nudity. During the course of an art school education, I have drawn scores of nudes of divers shapes and sizes—so they affect me neither one way nor the other. But those saccharine, pink-and-white beauties, whose nighties have a tendency of falling off one shoulder! Ugh! I much prefer the overgrown spiders, the hideous lizards and the exotic flora and fauna that we don't learn about in school. *They* typify the bizarre contents of the magazine, while the scantily clad chorus gals would look more at home on *French Frolics.*"

Keep Weird Tales Weird

Eugene Benefiel, of Los Angeles, writes: "Just a line to add my voice to the apparently rapidly-growing following of C. L. Moore. Although *Scarlet Dream* did not quite come up to the level set by *Shambleau* and *Black Thirst,* it easily topped every other story in your May issue. . . . It would be a shame to curb Brundage's potent brush by forbidding him to paint nudes. I for one think they are excellent—particularly two I remember well. One was his cover illustration for *The Slithering Shadow,* the other for *Black Colossus.* In closing, I echo the cry of several readers who have written to the Eyrie—'Keep WEIRD TALES weird.'"

Out of the Silence

Victor Arugeti, of Los Angeles, writes: "After ten years of silence I will now voice my opinions. I don't like stories of the space guard control type that Edmond Hamilton writes about; my views are similar to Alonzo Leonard, whom you hailed as a new author in the December issue. Neither do I care for vampire tales, but they aren't so hard to take down. I do like stories of lost civilizations, time travel, stories of the jungle, and tales of the future. But I don't like a story that is all action. I like a lot of atmosphere and if possible some interesting characters, something like Solomon Kane and King Kull in Howard's stories (in preference to his latest character, Conan), the monk in *The Holiness of Azedarac* by Clark Ashton Smith, and Northwest Smith in Moore's stories. The three authors whose characters I mentioned, I consider your best of the regular authors. C. L. Moore, your latest find, is great. I have read all three of his stories and I am waiting for the fourth. *Shambleau* was one of the best I have ever read, and *Black Thirst* was even better. I thought that was tops, but *Scarlet Dream* intoxicated me like a bottle of old rare wine."

They Called Him Ghost

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "The June issue of WEIRD TALES . . . contained one of the most unusual and different stories ever printed. That, of course, was Laurence J. Cahill's tale of reincarnation, *They Called Him Ghost.* This story should certainly be picked and placed in the O. Henry memorial collection as one of the best stories in the year. For the next two stories I pick *The Haunter of the Ring* by Robert E. Howard and *The Colossus of Ylourgne* by Clark Ashton Smith. . . . Now for my 'pet peeve.' The reprint story, *Maese Perez, the Organist,* was absolutely rotten. I can see no advantage in digging up stories of the past century written in an old archaic style, and reprinting them, when there are so many excellent ones to be had from old issues of WEIRD TALES. Stories like *Frankenstein* and the above are not weird or even interesting. And speaking of reprints, I am still looking for John Martin Leahy's tale of cosmic horror, *In Amundsen's Tent.*"

Another Bouquet for Cahill

Henry Hasse, of Indianapolis, writes: "I had intended to send the vote coupon this month, and no letter, but changed my mind

after reading *They Called Him Ghost*, by Laurence J. Cahill. Attractive title, ditto for the illustration, and the rare treat of a real surprize ending. Of all the reincarnation stories WEIRD TALES has printed, I can not think of one which approaches this one for all-around excellence. Besides offering a very plausible theory of reincarnation, the style and handling are very neat. Register my vote for *They Called Him Ghost* as the best in the June issue. Robert E. Howard *(The Haunter of the Ring)* must again be satisfied with second place, and *He Walked by Day* by Julius Long is an easy third. Publish the magazine with nudes or without them, or even without covers, so long as you give us an occasional story of such excellence as *They Called Him Ghost*."

Smith, Moore and Howard

C. A. Butts, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, writes: "I wish to express my high approbation of the type of fiction which you publish. WT is the only magazine to be depended upon for high quality in every issue. Perhaps I am not in agreement with the majority of your readers in my estimation of C. L. Moore, for I think he is far surpassed by Howard, whose Conan stories are excellent things of their kind. I might add, too, that if Clark Ashton Smith would leave off writing of his no-man's land 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon' and come down to the everyday world of actuality he could hardly be touched for sheer horror."

Tsetse Flies and Winged Death

D. de Woronin, of Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia, Africa, writes: "With regard to *Winged Death*, by Mrs. Hazel Heald, may I cross test-tubes and breeding-cages with the author? In that story you read that 'tsetse flies don't infect human beings.' I wish to goodness she were right, for only last October a friend of mine died as a result of being bitten by a tsetse fly while he was on a hunting-trip in the northern part of Southern Rhodesia. True, human victims of the fly are very rare in this country—I doubt that there is one death per annum—but, all the same, man is not immune. And I can assure you that the death is not so pleasant as it may sound. There is little actual sleep attached to it, if any at all, the condition being that of semi-stupor and lingering agony. . . . In my last letter I proclaimed *Shambleau* as the best story I've ever read in your magazine, so you can imagine my delight in seeing that *Black Thirst*, by the same author, is due next month. And brother Conan seems to be returning, too; so the April number promises to be even better than the March one, which only goes to prove that I am right in my contention that the magazine is getting better and better with every issue."

About WT Artists

Lester Anderson, of Hayward, California, writes: "Please tell M. Brundage to change the gal on the cover. She's a sweet gal and all that, but this raven-haired, wide-eyed beauty who has graced the limelight since last February should give someone else a break. She's even had on the same breastplates. . . . Really, though, the April and May covers were, excepting the above-mentioned faults, most excellent, and what's more they were weird, which is more than I can say for most of your covers in many years. M. Brundage is one of the finest artists you have ever had; the other two being St. John and Rankin."

Supreme Praise

Joseph Robinsky, of Elizabeth, New Jersey, writes, in part: "Your magazine is incomparable; it has no rival and never will.

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Its whole set-up, advertising and appearance are high class, and its policy and type of stories can't be equaled. It is like a gem among the many cheap pulp-paper magazines. It has no equal. For a while, I was prejudiced against Brundage's covers, but his very beautiful cover for the June issue has made me relent. He certainly is improving. The cover is so fantastic and weird, and nudity is not dominant. It's reminiscent of the old WT covers. Keep it up."

Praise for Jack Williamson

Alvin Earl Perry, of Rockdale, Texas, writes: "Never have I seen such an impressive cover as that depicting a scene from Williamson's *Wizard's Isle* in the June WT. Brundage has reached his (or is it her?) artistic peak. The only cover design which even approaches this was the one by the same artist illustrating Howard's tale of Conan entitled *Black Colossus*, in the June 1933 issue. Jack Williamson kept up the reputation which he gained by writing *Golden Blood*, when he turned out *Wizard's Isle*. The story gripped my interest from beginning to end; Jack, who seems to send his best stories to WT, outdid himself. Thank you for those little notes which have been appearing with one or two of the feature stories for the past few months. They are good. Don't stop them. *Mandolin* struck me as being something different. Perhaps I am wrong, but, mark my words, the name Will Charles Oursler will be on everyone's lips in the near future. He has the makings of a great writer. As usual, Clark Ashton Smith and Robert E. Howard provided some of their distinctive thrills, to round out an excellent issue."

A Colossal Story

Robert Nelson, of St. Charles, Illinois, writes: "Clark Ashton Smith's *The Colossus of Ylourgne* is most certainly a mighty and magnificent masterpiece, a tale written by a Titan who himself could well be deemed worthy to wrestle with the clouds and march upon those who are far less significant than he. *The Colossus of Ylourgne* is one of the greatest stories I have ever read and one that I shall long remember. . . . I found the reprint story this month, Gustavo Adolfo Becquer's *Maese Perez, the Organist*, most interesting. Within its lines I detected an ironic signification."

Moore and Quinn

Mrs. Irene L. Scheffley, of Washington, D. C., writes: "I just got my June copy of WT and am greatly disappointed to see that Seabury Quinn is missing again. I can un-

My favorite stories in the August WEIRD TALES are:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)----------	Why? ----------
(2)----------	----------

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in WEIRD TALES if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

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derstand that he might run out of material or even become bored with his splendid Frenchman, but my disappointment is not thereby lessened. No praise is too great for C. L. Moore's *Shambleau,* and quite possibly Moore will frequently be given first place over Quinn, but because of the difference in the kind of stories written by each it can never be said that Quinn is second to Moore. Each must remain great in his own right. *Shambleau,* I think, reached a peak of excellence which the new author will not frequently attain, but by it we know that all his stories will be good. He can well replace some of WT's authors, but please do not let it be Seabury Quinn." [You will be glad to learn that Seabury Quinn will return to the pages of WT in next month's issue with a tale about Jules de Grandin, entitled *The Jest of Warburg Tantavul.* This story is fully up to the high standard that you have come to look for in Quinn's tales.—THE EDITOR.]

Spider-Bite

R. O. Calkin, of Portland, Oregon, writes: "Enjoy WT very much and have been a reader for several years. Would like very much to see a reprint of *The Tomb Spider*—do not know the author or the copy it came in. Seabury Quinn still rates ace-high as my favorite author. Would like to see a weird tale written sometime about some high snow-capped peaks, as mountain climbing is my favorite hobby. Your covers are quite O. K. —more power to 'em." [The story you refer to is undoubtedly *Spider-Bite,* by Robert S. Carr, which appeared in WT for June, 1926. It is a tale of Egyptian tomb spiders. We may republish this in our reprint department, for it is a striking story. You will be interested to know that young Carr, the author of the story, has been in Moscow for the last three years, placing his literary talents at the disposal of the Soviet government.—THE EDITOR.]

La Morte Amoureuse

G. Edward Summers, of Princeton, Indiana, writes: "One of the most hauntingly beautiful weird stories I have been fortunate enough to come upon is Théophile Gautier's *La Morte Amoureuse.* Why not print this exquisite bit of tender prose in your reprint department, so that all fans of weird fiction

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may have an opportunity to read it? . . . Place my vote in favor of Smith's *The Colossus of Ylourgne* for first place in the June issue." [We agree with your appraisal of *La Morte Amoureuse,* for we consider this story one of the greatest vampire tales ever written. But we have already used it in our Weird Story Reprint department, in the February issue, 1928, under the title *Clarimonde.* The translation was by Lafcadio Hearn. The story has also been beautifully translated by Andrew Lang, under the title, *The Dead Leman.*—THE EDITOR.]

A Magazine for Skeptics?

Richard P. Tooker writes from Phoenix, Arizona: "Sometimes I wonder how many of your readers read WEIRD TALES because they have utterly no belief in the supernatural. One who believes in ghosts couldn't read it, seems to me; it would scare him to death. C. L. Moore is a find, but he hasn't repeated *Shambleau* by a mile."

The House of the Worm

Phyllis A. Whitney, of Chicago, writes: "I want to say that I think *The House of the Worm* by Mearle Prout, which appeared several issues ago, was one of the most imaginative and truly horrible tales I've ever read —not barring even the stories of Arthur Machen, who happens to be my god when it comes to the weird. I was surprized to see it mentioned only once in the Eyrie."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Write a letter to the Eyrie giving your views, or fill out the coupon on page 270 of this issue. The most popular story in the June issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was *The Colossus of Ylourgne,* by Clark Ashton Smith. Laurence J. Cahill's strange story of reincarnation, *They Called Him Ghost,* won second place.

The Weirdest Story Ever Told

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By C. L. MOORE

(Author of "Shambleau")

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"Communicate this to the various governments of the earth:

"As a preliminary to the establishment of my sole rule throughout the world, the following demands must be complied with:

"First: All standing armies shall be disbanded, and every implement of warfare, of whatsoever nature, destroyed.

"Second: All war vessels shall be assembled—those of the Atlantic fleets midway between New York and Gibraltar, those of the Pacific fleets midway between San Francisco and Honolulu—and sunk.

"Third: One-half of all the monetary gold supply of the world shall be collected and turned over to my agents at places to be announced later.

"Fourth: At noon on the third day after the foregoing demands have been complied with, all existing governments shall resign and surrender their powers to my agents, who will be on hand to receive them.

"In my next communication I will fix the date for the fulfillment of these demands.

"The alternative is the destruction of the globe.

"KWO"

Who was this mysterious "KWO," and was his message actually a momentous declaration to the human race, or merely a hoax perpetrated by some person with an over-vivid imagination?

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